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## ***'ART RESCUED FROM A 50-YEAR TIME CAPSULE'*** **CZECH SURREALISM BETWEEN THE WARS**

**SOTHEBY'S TO SELL CZECH AVANT-GARDE ART FROM  
THE ROY & MARY CULLEN COLLECTION IN LONDON  
ON 12 NOVEMBER 2014**



Toyen, **The Message of the Forest**, oil on canvas, 1936, Estimate: £700,000-1,000,000

**LONDON, 23 September 2014** – On 12 November 2014 in London, Sotheby's will present Czech Avant-Garde Art from the Roy & Mary Cullen Collection. Adrian Biddell, Senior Director, Sotheby's 19<sup>th</sup> Century European Paintings Department, describes the Roy & Mary Cullen Collection, as *"an extraordinary collecting achievement. Formed with a combination of passion and patience, it focuses on the rich and compelling story of Czech Avant-*

*Garde art between the First and Second World Wars as told by the artists, illustrators, photographers and writers of the time. The paintings, works on paper, prints and books capture the visual, literary and intellectual ideas that flourished in Prague and Paris during this period. Sotheby's sale of the Hascoe Collection of Czech Modern Art in London in June 2011 revealed enormous interest in the market for Czech art and realised more than double the pre-sale estimate. The Roy & Mary Cullen Collection presents the next chapter in Czech art, specifically Czech Surrealism between the wars."* Comprising approximately 120 lots, the Roy & Mary Cullen Collection is expected to bring in the region of £1.7 million.

### The Formation of The Roy & Mary Cullen Collection

Speaking about the Collection, Mary Cullen said: *"Inspired by the pioneering exhibition, 'Czech Modernism', at the Houston Museum of Fine Arts many years ago, Roy and I created this collection using our own eye and emotional responses as a guide. Many of the works we had seen in that show literally stopped us in our tracks. During visits to Prague, just as it was emerging from the isolation of the Communist era and later, we found beautiful, powerful works which had been created by artists, often under conditions of great adversity. On our journey of discovery we were fortunate to make friends and acquaintances, on both sides of the Atlantic, with a broad circle of curators, art historians and writers in the field of Czech Surrealism through whom we also established ties with the families and associates of the Avant-Garde. With these invaluable insights we were able to ensure that the collection tells the whole story as much as possible."*



The Roy & Mary Cullen Collection tells a rich and densely layered story. Roy and Mary's interest was ignited by the October 1989 exhibition of *Czech Modernism 1900 - 1945* held at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston. Mrs Cullen's first purchase was a František Kupka pastel, **Etude pour accent noir (Femmes)**, acquired on a visit to Prague in 1992 (estimate: £20,000-30,000, illustrated left). Following an exploration of the galleries in Prague, Mrs Cullen quickly realised that most of the best work by the Czech Cubists had already been snapped up, but at the same time saw the amazing opportunities to be had in the pursuit of works by the Czech Surrealists.

The star of the collection is unquestionably Czech artist Toyen's **The Message of the Forest**, painted in 1936, an especially fecund year for the artist (estimate: £700,000-1,000,000, illustrated on page 1). Mary Cullen first saw the painting in Prague in 2000 while it was on loan at a major retrospective exhibition on the artist and the image immediately grabbed her. The painting was not available for sale, but a few months later, during which

time Mrs Cullen's obsession with the work had grown stronger, the owner decided to part with it, and after negotiations over the telephone, the Cullens acquired what was to be the highlight of their collection.

Toyen (Marie Čermínová) was in her early thirties when she painted **The Message of the Forest**, and producing some of her most daring and powerful imagery. Living in Paris between 1925 and 1928, Toyen and contemporary Czech artist Jindrich Štyrský had developed a particular artistic style called Artificialism, a transition between Cubism and Surrealism; a decade later, that transition was complete. The main representative of the inter-war Czech Avant-Garde, Toyen was the only woman at the forefront of that circle. The picture is the largest canvas Toyen produced in 1936, and also the most carefully considered and worked out. It shows her at her innovative and figural best, combining the spectral cyclopean features of the owl, presented on a richly textured yet ruptured backdrop, the bird's lone claw clasp the head of a girl suspended in space. The subject distils a crucial theme in Toyen's work, that of the power of nature, embodied in the voracious owl, over the human world and its laws. The themes of night and the forest were embraced by the Surrealists, for whom the forest was a wild place symbolising the unconscious.

### An Exciting Discovery

One of the most exciting collecting opportunities presented itself to Mary Cullen in Paris in 2004, during her attendance at the second major auction of André Breton's estate by Calmels Cohen at the Hôtel Drouot Richelieu. A portrait of André Breton by Toyen was the focus of her attention. The picture was overlooked when the first Breton estate sale took place the previous year. Toyen had given it to Breton and hung it in his studio above a large bookcase; the nail broke and the portrait fell down behind it. For over 50 years it lay undiscovered and was subsequently missed in the inventory for the first estate sale.

**Portrait of André Breton** (1950), in crayon, charcoal, oil and glitter on linen, sets the Surrealist founder's profile in the centre of three triangles which are surrounded by symbols of the four elements, a reflection of Breton's growing interest at the time in alchemy and esotericism (estimate: £120,000-180,000, illustrated right). In 1947, wary of the rise of Communism in Prague, Toyen fled for Paris where she remained for the rest of her life, and became an active member of Breton's circle.



Breton played an important role in Toyen's life, as had Radovan Ivšić and Annie Le Brun, her friends and collaborators in Paris. Mary Cullen was introduced to Radovan and Annie at the 2004 auction. Sensing Mrs

Cullen's passion for Czech art, they invited her to their home and pointed out a blue sofa where Toyen had slept in her advancing years when she was too tired to make the journey home. Radovan and Annie brought Mrs Cullen into closer proximity with Toyen through their shared history and special bond.

### Artists Persevering Against All Odds



Mary Cullen comments: *“What is so amazing to me is that so many artists, even in the worst of times, could rise above their circumstances and create something so beautiful.”*<sup>1</sup> One of these artists was Karel Teige, the leading theorist and organiser of the Czech Avant-Garde between the Wars. Teige founded the Czech artists’ association Devětsil in 1920, and published its magazine, the periodical ReD; in 1934, he co-founded the Surrealist Group in Czechoslovakia with Jindrich Štyrský. He revolutionised book design and typography, and in 1935 embraced the Surrealist method of collage which became his chief mode of expression in the last 15 year of his life. The collage by Teige in the Roy & Mary Cullen collection (estimate: £50,000-70,000, illustrated left) reflects his

fascination with the female form, and its component parts. Dating from 1947 in the immediate post-Second World War years, he ridicules the glamour of the air force, by juxtaposing the smoothness of an inverted pair of pin-up legs emerging from the wing markings of a Spitfire fighter plane, with a trio of Spitfires flying past behind.

Teige was blacklisted in 1948 when the Communists took over the government and banned from publishing. He continued to work clandestinely, and with his collages he came up with a new vocabulary and language. Mary Cullen notes, *“At no time would he compromise his feelings or beliefs.”*<sup>2</sup> In 1951, Teige died of a heart attack; the following day, his lover and companion of many years, Josefina (Jožka Navařilová), also died; ten days later, his young assistant and mistress, Eva Ebertová, also passed away, both apparently were suicides. Mrs Cullen continues, *“We may never finally know the whole truth about what happened during those dark years. What remains is the testament of the artwork itself.”*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> As told to Alison de Lima Greene in *“Accidental Revolutionaries: In Conversation with Roy & Mary Cullen”*, *New Formations, Czech Avant-Garde Art and Modern Glass*, The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 2011

<sup>2</sup> As above

<sup>3</sup> As above



Among the group of photographs in the sale is a selection of photomontages by Jindřich Heisler. These prints reveal an astonishing inventiveness, yet the artist was forced to produce them in extraordinary circumstances. As Mary Cullen comments, “During the war, Toyen had to hide Heisler in her bathroom. And yet Heisler ended up doing these astounding photomontages in a teeny, depressing room.”<sup>4</sup>

Four prints by Heisler, made in 1943, are each estimated at £8,000-12,000.

### The Close Relationship Between The Czech and Parisian Surrealists



Among the key oil paintings in the collection is the enigmatic **Roots** by Jindřich Štyrský (estimate: £150,000-250,000, illustrated left). The provenance of the work underlines the close relationship between the Czech and Parisian Surrealists, Štyrský giving it as a gift to André Breton. The painting was shown at the first International Surrealist Exhibition

organised by Breton and Roland Penrose in London in 1936, and included in the first Breton estate sale in Paris in 2003. The striking horizontality of the painting focuses on a prosaic source of inspiration: the artist’s photographic study of roots in the Šumava Mountains in the summer of 1934. The biomorphic forms – taken from nature, drawing on Artificialism and informed by Surrealism – evolve into one of Štyrský’s most suggestively figural oil paintings. Štyrský worked alongside Toyen for two decades, until his untimely death in 1942, during which time they lived together, collaborated and sparred off each other. Co-founder of the Surrealist Group in Czechoslovakia in 1934, Štyrský’s exhibited in all of the international exhibitions of Surrealism before the War.



As well as oil painting, Štyrský’s interest in working in collage peaked in 1935 when he presented a cycle of collages entitled **Portable Cabinet** at the Group of Surrealists exhibition in Prague in 1935. Ranging from the everyday to the exotic; the suggestive to the explicit, and the humorous to the shocking; the combination of the diverse sizes of the works in the cycle, the cryptic juxtaposition of the selected cut-outs, and their sexualised content offer a rich peep show of imagery.

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<sup>4</sup> As told to Alison de Lima Greene in “Accidental Revolutionaries: In Conversation with Roy & Mary Cullen”, *New Formations, Czech Avant-Garde Art and Modern Glass*, The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 2011



Two untitled collages from the suite are in the Roy & Mary Cullen collection. One is a suggestively simple placement of a cigar (estimate: £15,000-20,000, illustrated on previous page); the other, using a print titled 'one's good fortune, the other's misfortune' as inspiration, caricatures the awkward embrace of a couple as they are surprised by a man in a dinner jacket (estimate: £80,000-120,000, illustrated left). In the early 1930s Štyrský established both *The Erotic Review* and *Edition 69*. In the last volume of *Edition 69* published in 1933, he included his controversial short story *Emilie Comes to me in a Dream*, illustrated with ten photomontages.

One of the original photomontages, expressing the artist's macabre fascination with sex and death, will be included in the sale (estimate: £40,000-60,000).

### Books Conceived As Artworks

The thread of figuration throughout gives the collection its intellectual edge, and the visual breadth is underpinned by the remarkable collection of books in the sale relating to the period. The texts and printed images were developed in the thriving Czech artistic circles of the day; they proved to be critical in the dissemination of the artistic theories they developed.

Karel Teige and Jaroslav Seifert produced their revolutionary anthology *Devětsil* in 1922, followed by Teige's seminal journal *ReD*, of which there is a complete run of issues from 1927 to 1930 in the auction. There are numerous works by Vítězslav Nezval, together with books designed or illustrated by Toyen and Štyrský, including their *Erotická Review*. The close connection with the Parisian Surrealists is evident in the translations of André Breton, Apollinaire and Maurois with illustrations by Czech avant-gardists. Some of the books are hand-coloured and contain reproductions of the artworks in the Roy & Mary Cullen Collection.



A highlight of the books selection is Vítězslav Nezval's *Abeceda [Alphabet]* (Prague, 1926). Nezval wrote a collection of short poems treating the various letters of the alphabet at the beginning of the 1920s; its popularity amongst *Devětsil*'s members led to a recital in April 1926, accompanied by a performance by the dancer Milča Mayerová. The theatrical treatment was the catalyst for a book and collaboration among several artists: Nezval supplied the text, Mayerová provided the physical interpretation of each letter and poem, and Karel Pasma the photography; Karel Teige gave the work its principal design. The 26 two-page spreads link photography and typography, and secured Teige a place among the most important European typographers (estimate: £1,500-2,000, illustrated left).

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## **Notes to Editors**

Highlights from The Roy & Mary Cullen Collection will be exhibited in Paris (2 – 6 October), Vienna (8 – 9 October) and Prague (31 October – 1 November).

London is the international centre of the market for Czech Art, where Sotheby's has offered all of the most important collections of Czech art to come to auction, including The Milan Heidenreich Collection in 1997-98 (the first collection of Czech Modern art to come to auction) and The Hascoe Family Collection of Important Czech Art in 2011.

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