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Piece of Wood, a Knife and a Man's Genius

The Woodcut Albums of Frans Masereel



In early Spring 1919, in a dingy apartment in Geneva, Frans Masereel (1889-1972) produced the 167 woodcuts of the autobiographical story *Mon Livre d'Heures* with which he made a name for himself as an innovator in the art of woodcutting. Ten years later, the first of three American editions was published (*My Book of Hours*), but the impact of the album in post-war Europe was much stronger than it was in the United States. In Germany, in particular, low-priced editions of this 'block-book' and subsequent albums, as well as a number of large woodcuts and a great many book illustrations, made Masereel the most popular graphic artist of the twenties, after his friend George Grosz. Reproductions of his humanitarian-pacifist woodcuts and drawings were to be found not only in books, newspapers and magazines, but also in pamphlets and calendars, on leaflets and posters. It is not surprising, therefore, that a great deal has been written about him in German¹. The latest bibliography of his graphic work was published in Munich (1992), while most of his archive has been acquired by the Frans Masereel Foundation in Saarbrücken. On the Anglo-Saxon side, notable publications are few: the essay 'Artist against War' by John Willett, in *The Times Literary Supplement* of 29 July 1960; the book edition of *The Radical Imagination: Frans Masereel* (London, 1972) by Joseph Herman; and the introduction ('The World of Frans Masereel') to the catalogue of an exhibition in Toronto, Canada (Art Gallery of Windsor, 1981). Is it that Masereel's black-and-whites do not appeal to an Anglo-Saxon public? Ten years ago, the Redstone Press in London brought out 'boxed editions' of five Masereel albums to commemorate the centenary of his birth. Impressed by the positive response to these collector's editions, Penguin Books followed up with an inexpensive edition of *Passionate Journey (My Book of Hours)*, of which 25,000 copies were printed. Six months after publication (October 1988), some 8,500 copies had been sold. John Willett was right: '*The fact is that we can all perceive something brave and humane here, which has inspired fine actions and fine works of art, and (at times) a remarkable balance between the two. We can perceive it; but it has got to be made available first.*'

Addicted to his craft

Frans Masereel was born in the Flemish seaside resort of Blankenberge, north of Ostend. After the early death of his father – a retired textile manufacturer – 5-year-old Frans, with his younger brother and sister, was taken back by his mother to her native town of Ghent, where she remarried to a doctor. This open-minded, libertarian stepfather had a decisive influence on Masereel, who, as a youngster, took part in demonstrations against child labour and the degrading working conditions in local textile mills at the turn of the century. The appalling misery he saw in the impoverished inner-city of Ghent provoked the fierce social criticism in his post-war work.

As a student at the Ghent Academy of Fine Arts, Masereel was far too wilful a talent to conform to academic views. So, in 1911, he left for Paris to improve himself as an artist. A close friend of his was Léon Bazalgette, the first French translator and biographer of the American poet Walt Whitman. To Masereel, Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* became one of the foremost sources of inspiration for the internationalist and humanitarian belief he propagated in his work: during the First World War, in Geneva, as a volun-



teer with the International Red Cross and as a contributor to the newspaper *La feuille*, for which he drew hundreds of anti-war cartoons; then, from the end of 1922, back in Paris as an independent artist. Referring to this intense pacifist activity during the war years, Hermann Hesse noted that ‘*Masereel was really the only man who, day by day, did something sensible, something good, something to be thankful for.*’ Like Thomas Mann, Hesse wrote an inspired introduction to one of the woodcut stories – called ‘*novels without words*’ by Stefan Zweig – for which Masereel became known in the twenties: *The Passion of Man* (25 Images de la Passion d’un Homme), *Passionate Journey* (Mon Livre d’Heures), *The Sun* (Le Soleil), *The Idea* (L’Idée), *Story without Words* (Histoire sans Paroles), *Memories of my Home-Land* (Souvenirs de mon Pays), *The City* (La Ville), *The Work* (L’Œuvre). As an illustrator, Masereel produced his masterpiece with the woodcuts for a two-part edition of Charles de Coster’s *Ulenspiegel* (Munich, 1926 and Antwerp, 1937), which was republished, in one volume, in New York during the Second World War (*The Glorious Adventures of Tyl Ulenspiegel*, 1943).

Apart from the technical mastery and the constantly surprising flights of imagination, the finest woodcuts of Masereel are particularly impressive for their accessibility to the many and for their poignancy, which has, in no small way, to do with the medium itself. Turning over the pages of *Passionate Journey*, Thomas Mann reflected that ‘*Today, as it did five hundred years ago, it requires nothing but a piece of peartree-wood, a small knife – and a man’s genius.*’ On the other hand, noticing the influence of the newest medium, he called the album the most wonderful film he knew.

As a painter and watercolourist Masereel created some marvelous portraits and seascapes, as well as a number of compelling visions of Parisian nightlife, but throughout his life he remained, above all, a ‘master engraver’. He was addicted to his craft, which, due to his social vision of art, gave him much more satisfaction than painting. ‘*Selling a canvas is great*’, he once said, ‘*but it disappears into some gentleman’s collection and that’s the end of it, a first class funeral, that is what it boils down to. I chose wood-engraving because I can reach a large public with it.*’

While art dealers and critics put Masereel among the Expressionists for convenience’ sake, he himself never accepted the label and consistently refused to defer to systems and theories. Both his artistic views and his libertarian-socialist beliefs made him an outsider. ‘*A survivor of that utopian socialism*’, Willett rightly calls him. Despite his bitter disappointment with so-called socialist governments and parties that disgraced themselves by shamelessly repudiating the ideal of a world without violence and oppression, Masereel never allowed himself to be paralysed by the realisation of his powerlessness as an individual, nor to become a cynical observer of the human race. In the introduction to the woodcut series *From Black to White* (Du Noir au Blanc), which opens with primeval forest scenes, he says he didn’t want the story to end in the jungle – ‘*to suggest that the world will return to chaos*’. Although he realised this probably would have made a more ‘artistic’ impression, both his nature and his reason were opposed to the cynicism and fatalism which pervaded modern art.

Frans Masereel, Woodcut
from *Die Geschichte von
Ulenspiegel und Lamme
Goedzak* (1926). © SABAM
Belgium 1999.

Frans Masereel, Woodcut
from *Du Noir au Blanc*
(1939). © SABAM Belgium
1999.

'Dear Herr Masereel'

When Masereel moved back to Paris from Geneva – until 1929 he was regarded as a draft evader by the Belgian State – it looked as if he would make a name for himself in America too. One of his fervent overseas admirers was Frank Crowninshield, editor-in-chief of *Vanity Fair* which, in 1921 and 1922, published an extensive selection from *The Idea* and *The Passion of Man*. For this New York magazine Masereel produced dozens of 'American' brush drawings, most of them caricatures and satirical fantasies about a dehumanised society run by money and technology.

The series opened in December 1922 with *New York Harbor – As Imagined by Frans Masereel*, a fog of industrial smoke, from which only the arm of the Statue of Liberty protrudes with the torch. In an issue from 1923 the editor presents him as one of the most interesting young artists in Europe: 'because, in such series as *Le Soleil and Passion*, he has invented something like a new genre – the movie in woodcuts – but chiefly because, as a social satirist, he comes nearer than any other contemporary to filling the role of Hogarth and Daumier.' Meanwhile, in Paris, Masereel was fascinated by the Americanised entertainment in bars, music-halls, jazz cabarets and nightclubs. A song by George Gershwin inspired one of his finest 'black-and-white poems' from the thirties: 'I can't thank you enough for that wonderful proof of your large wood block called *Somebody Loves Me*', wrote Crowninshield, after having received a print as a gift.

Masereel had exhibitions all over Europe in the twenties, as well as in New York (1923) and in Moscow (1926). In 1929 he was honoured with a first big retrospective in Mannheim. However, he only got his first London exhibition in 1936, through his lifelong friend Stefan Zweig, who was living in England as an emigrant at that time. In a letter to Georg Reinhart, Masereel's Swiss patron, Zweig regretted that the exhibition had made little impression, as there were no drawings or woodcuts on display and the paintings exhibited did not, on their own, reflect Masereel's real stature as an artist. By omitting his major contribution to the graphic arts, the opportunity of introducing some of his finest works to the British public was sadly missed. 'If they would finally introduce his woodcut books here too', Zweig added, 'we could win the Anglo-Saxon world for him as well.'

Since all Masereel books had been banned from German bookshops after the Nazi takeover in 1933, Zweig and Masereel's expatriate German publisher Regendanz toyed with the idea of establishing a small publishing company in London, which would deal, in particular, with the work of Masereel. Nothing came of it though. Nine months after the opening of his New York exhibition at the beginning of 1940, Masereel applied for a 'special emergency visa' so that, if necessary, he could flee to the United States with his French wife Pauline. In the end the Masereels survived the war without having to emigrate. After their flight from Paris, they stayed in Avignon for three years in the most wretched conditions. When the Germans took over the unoccupied zone in 1943, they assumed false identities and moved into an abandoned watermill that served as a 'letterbox' for the resistance. Shortly before the liberation, Masereel just managed to escape a German round-up in the region. As he had lost most of his possessions in Paris and in his little house at the seaside near Boulogne, it was not

Frans Masereel, *Somebody Loves Me* (woodcut, 1933).
© SABAM Belgium 1999.

Frans Masereel, Woodcut from *Notre Temps* (1952).
© SABAM Belgium 1999.



until 1949 that he could move back to the civilised world. He spent the last twenty years of his life in a flat near the old harbour of Nice, in relative isolation, although he remained as productive as he was before the war. Unquestionably, the most memorable of his woodcut series from the fifties and sixties are the illustrations for the Hemingway story *The Old Man and the Sea*. In this last period of his life several honours were conferred on Masereel, including the Grand Prize for Graphics at the Venice Biennale (1951), the Joost van den Vondel prize (Hamburg, 1962) and the Käthe Kollwitz Medal (East Berlin, 1967). Masereel died in Avignon and was buried, in compliance with his explicit wishes, in his home town of Ghent.

The Sunday Times and *The London Review of Books* called the Redstone edition of *The City* (1988) a masterpiece, but the other London editions appear to have been just as much a revelation for the critics. *The Irish Independent* referred to the 'stunning woodcuts' of *Passionate Journey*, whilst *Story without Words* was described by *The Guardian* as a series of 'sixty woodcuts of great force and brilliance'. *The New Statesman* even had the latter printed as a desk diary for 1990, as a gift for new subscribers.

Despite these attempts to make the name of Masereel 'fashionable', little or nothing has changed since 1960, when John Willett came to the conclusion that Masereel's work was 'virtually unknown' in England. In America it was saved from oblivion by German and Austrian immigrants, most notably the publisher Kurt Wolff (Pantheon Books, New York), and collectors like Walter Otto Schneider (Beverly Hills, California) and Walter Engel

(Toronto, Canada). Amongst the letters and cards from American admirers – one of them is addressed to ‘*Dear Herr Masereel*’ – in the archives of the Frans Masereel Foundation, I found a letter of 1949, which was written in English by an Austrian immigrant, an assistant professor at New York University. No official tribute could have pleased Masereel more than these heartfelt words from a perfect stranger:

‘Dear Mr Masereel:

It is more than 25 years ago that I became acquainted with your woodcuts. I was then 23 years of age – a student of engineering in Vienna, Austria, and full of enthusiasm for our Europe, for the new Europe and for the men who fought for this New and United Europe.

I really enjoyed my youth. A horrible war was over and we believed that it was a war against the war. I believed that a new era had begun. I read the books by the great Romain Rolland, by the good European Stefan Zweig ...

*Among the books which I liked best, especially one book was dear to my heart: your *Livre d’Heures*. This book had greater influence on me than any other book; however, I did not know this 25 years ago.*

1938, everything I believed in was destroyed – however, I did not intend to leave the ‘Heimat’. It is hard to emigrate without being forced to do so. In 1939, I decided to leave Europe, and in 1940 I actually materialised my plans and settled down in the United States.

*I could not take too much of my belongings with me. However, among these very few things were your *Livre d’Heures* and another of your books which was given to me by my mother. Wherever I went I took these two books with me. Since then I acquired again several more of your books, and only recently a friend of mine gave me *Jeunesse*. In a New York bookshop I found recently a copy of the Holitscher-Zweig ‘*Masereel*’ book. This book was formerly the property of the Austrian National Library and was ‘ausgeschieden’² during the Nazi-regime. This book, with your signature, is now among my collection of Masereel books.*

Dear Mr Masereel, in a few days or so you will celebrate your sixtieth birthday. At this occasion, I want to thank you for everything you have given me within a quarter of a century. I am just one of the great number of your ‘readers’ – one of those people whose life you have enriched – just one among thousands and thousands whom you have shown a way of living ... Without knowing me, you have done so much for me; all I can do now is to say: I thank you!’

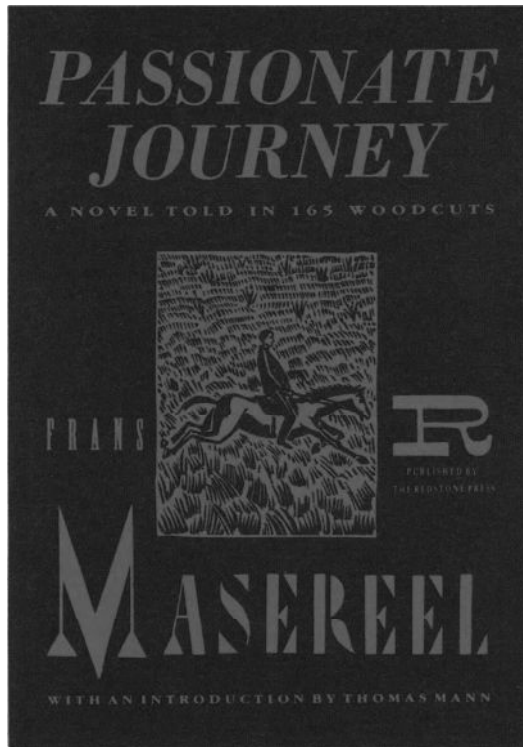
JORIS VAN PARYS

Translated by Lindsay Edwards.

NOTES

1. In 1999 a German edition of the Dutch Masereel biography by Joris van Parys (*Masereel. Een biografie*. Antwerp / Baarn, 1995) is to be published by Edition 8 in Zurich

2. Eliminated



POSTWAR BRITISH AND AMERICAN EDITIONS

Woodcut albums

Passionate Journey (Mon Livre d'Heures, 165 woodcuts). New York: Lear Publishers, 1948; New York: Dover Publications, 1971; London: Redstone Press, 1987; London: Penguin Books, 1988. The first American edition of *Mon Livre d'Heures* was published in 1930 in Chicago (Argus Books) as *My Book of Hours*.

Story without Words (Histoire sans Paroles, 60 woodcuts). London: Redstone Press, 1986 (in one volume with *The Idea* (L'Idée, 83 woodcuts)).

The City (La Ville, 100 woodcuts). New York: Dover Publications, 1972; New York: Schocken Books, 1987; London: Redstone Press, 1988.

The Sun (Le Soleil, 63 woodcuts). London: Redstone Press, 1990.

Schocken Books, New York, published a selection of 60 woodcuts from different sets in 1988 with the title *Landscapes and Voices*.

Illustrated books

The Creation – The First Chapters of Genesis (24 woodcuts). New York: Pantheon Books, 1948.

Desiderius Erasmus, *Moriae Encomium or The Praise of Folly* (27 woodcuts from 1939). New York: Heritage Press, 1954.

Hugh MacDiarmid, *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (8 woodcuts). Falkland (Fife): Kulgin Duval & Colin H. Hamilton, 1969.

Oscar Wilde, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (37 woodcuts). London: Journeyman Press, 1978.