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The idiosyncratic fantasies of Bele Bachem : the life and work of Germany's forgotten postwar artist

Lydia Jane Dorsey

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College

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THE IDIOSYNCRATIC FANTASIES OF BELE BACHEM: THE LIFE AND WORK OF
GERMANY'S FORGOTTEN POSTWAR ARTIST

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
In partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

in

The School of Art

By
Lydia Jane Dorsey
B.A., Louisiana State University, 2012
May 2013

This thesis is dedicated to Bettina Böhmer, who welcomed me into her home without reservation and provided me with an invaluable perspective on her mother, Bele Bachem.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis constitutes the first comprehensive analysis written in English on the life and work of German-born, post-World War II artist, Bele Bachem. By translating and critically analyzing her diverse oeuvre, which spanned both fields of “applied” and “fine” arts, this thesis examines the three stages of the artist’s career: Bachem’s “Poetic Miniatures” and theater set design under the Third Reich (1938-1945), her postwar commercial work after West Germany’s *Wirtschaftswunder* for Rosenthal Porcelain (1949-1966), and her mature style of narrative fantasy paintings and female portraits completed in the Schwabing bohemian district of Munich (1957-1986). With this thesis, I aim to provide exposure as well as accessibility to a wider audience for this “forgotten” artist who emerged as one of the most famous women of postwar West Germany in the 1950s, but whose diverse and illustrious artistic legacy is fading with the disappearing postwar generation.

INTRODUCTION

“Ich bin mit einem eigenen Stil geboren—allem Suchen danach war ich enthoben”
(I was born with a unique style of my own—I did not have to search for it)
-Bele Bachem

The artistic legacy of German-born artist Bele Bachem resists traditional art historical classification into one specific artistic movement or style. Throughout her entire career, she remained a staunch individualist and never subscribed to a distinct aesthetic ideology. She resisted the collective predilection of twentieth-century art to challenge the limits of contemporaneous “modernism,” and instead remained immovably faithful to her own practice of art. Working across many mediums, she was a prolific painter, illustrator, ceramicist, sculptor, set designer, teacher, and writer, and due to her remarkable versatility and unique style, her work became a ubiquitous presence in Germany during the last half of the twentieth-century. Though she is often classified as a “surrealist” or “fantastic realist” for the narrative fantasy paintings of her mature style, the variety of Bachem’s artistic output over her sixty-year career demands a far less-limiting designation and a far more extensive examination of her work’s significance.

Bachem’s career spanned a tumultuous era in German history, as she was raised in the interwar years, spent her young adulthood under the oppressive shadow of the Third Reich, and made a career for herself during the difficult postwar years. During the early years of World War II, her naïve style “poetic miniatures” were published in ladies’ fashion magazines such as *Die Dame*, which garnered her national fame as well as the opportunity to work as stage set designer for one of the most important directors in Munich at the time, Otto Falckenberg. Yet her modern design contributions attracted the attention of the Nazi *Propagandaministerium* (Ministry of Propaganda), and as a result she received a publication ban. No longer able to publicly exhibit her work and surviving the bombing of her Berlin studio, the artist fled to the countryside of

southern Germany where she stayed until the end of the war, selling her small-scale paintings to Allied troops to buy food.

After the war, she would return to the war-torn city of Munich to work again for the theater industry at a time when poverty and starvation were the norm. Yet with her extreme versatility and resolve to succeed as a female artist and single mother, Bachem lent her talents to commercial pursuits almost exclusively during the fifties and sixties in order to make a living, designing for firms such as Rosenthal Porcelain, illustrating nearly one hundred books, and working for various German film and theater productions. Her whimsical, decorative postwar style characterized the optimistic spirit of the years following the *Wirtschaftswunder* (Economic Miracle) in West Germany, and with it she capitalized on the female consumer-driven mindset of popular aesthetic trends. Despite the fact that her commercial work made her a household name in West Germany, Bele Bachem's early designation within the field of "applied" arts seems to have disqualified her for higher art ordinations within the larger history of art.

In the sixties, Bachem moved back to the bohemian quarter of Schwabing in the Bavarian capital city of Munich, where she experienced a profound mid-career transition to painting. Abandoning the saccharinity of her commercial work, Bachem's late paintings are heavily influenced by traumatic episodes from her biography, which are transmogrified into a metaphysical world of memory and fantasy. Employing methods of surrealism and *Neue Sachlichkeit* satire, Bachem painted expansive landscapes filled with chimerical creatures, occult objects, and half-naked voluptuous female nudes that manage to amaze and bewilder, evoking deep subconscious associations of desire and repulsion. The complex iconography of these works defies concrete interpretation, as the artist offered very little information about the source of their inspiration. This omission presented a valuable opportunity for analysis.

I was first introduced to Bele Bachem's work by Dr. Darius Spieth, a native of Hamburg, Germany, whose mother has collected Bachem's work for years. As a lover of fairytales, I was immediately attracted to Bachem's work for its fantastic content, and was intrigued to learn about the artistic perspective of a German postwar painter who chose to fill her canvases with unicorns, fairy-creatures, monsters, and erotic women as opposed to the popular styles of abstraction and neo-expression of her artistic peers. She was introduced to me as an artistic outsider who had been overlooked and undervalued for her diverse artistic oeuvre and whose legacy was quickly being lost with the aging postwar German generation. Though the nature of the research was quite intimidating, as the literature on Bachem is written exclusively in German, I was motivated to unlock the secrets of her bizarre world of fantasy. After attaining the only nearly comprehensive source of information on Bele Bachem, her 1986 *Werkverzeichnis* (Catalog raisonné), I discovered her whimsical, decorative commercial designs for Rosenthal Porcelain and book illustrations of her early career, which seemed to contrast starkly with the dark dreamworld of her later paintings. This interesting dichotomy of style—between kitsch and erotic fantasy—needed to be further explored.

In February 2013, I had the opportunity to travel to Mallorca, Spain to meet Bele Bachem's daughter, Bettina Böhmer. There I was able to attain various film documentaries and more obscure sources on Bele Bachem, but most importantly I was able to conduct an interview. I had previously corresponded with Bettina over the phone and through letters for six months, but she insisted that I come visit her, drink a glass of wine, and talk about her mother. I sent her dozens of pointed questions, and was sure that she would have the answers. Though I had dedicated countless hours to collecting and translating sources on the artist, the encounter I had with Bettina changed my perception of Bele completely, and I discovered that many of my

questions were irrelevant or inapplicable. Before our meeting I had spent time trying to contextualize Bele Bachem's work within feminist theory and find comparisons with German female artists, looking for a way to fit her into a convenient art historical narrative. As I delved deeper into her personal biography through conversations with the artist's daughter, I learned of the true character of Bele Bachem, whose life was filled with adversity and intrigue, but whose art was characterized by a resilient, independent spirit that defied larger systems of categorization and classification.

Currently, there are no critical sources on Bele Bachem's work in English. Only a few scholarly essays on her work exist in German, but they do not provide the comprehensive biographical and stylistic analysis necessary to communicate the significance of this overlooked artist.¹ Therefore it is my aim to provide the first thorough examination of the life and work of Bele Bachem in the English language, analyzing the three stages of her career. In Chapter One: "Poetic Miniatures' during the Third Reich," I will provide a discussion of her early biography from childhood until immediately after World War II, as well as a framework of historical events with which to provide a context for the stylistic and thematic analysis of her early naïve style and her "poetic miniature" paintings in tempera. In Chapter Two: "Bele Bachem's Postwar Commercial Work," I will provide the reader with a sense of the changing social attitudes and economic state that typified the years immediately following the collapse of the Third Reich. Focusing on the concurrent rise of Bele Bachem to national fame with her work for Rosenthal Porcelain, I will argue that her style became a staple for the female consumer-driven market of West Germany in the fifties and sixties. In Chapter Three: "Artificial Paradises and Fantasy Portraits," I will create a contextual and conceptual framework with which to analyze and interpret Bachem's narrative fantasy paintings and erotic female portraits produced after 1955

¹ All translations appearing in the following thesis were completed by the author with the help of Dr. Darius Spieth

and present the possible autobiographical and artistic influences that inform the interpretation of her work. In this way, I hope not only to garner exposure for this “forgotten” artist, but also provide a way in which the American viewer can interpret and appreciate her fascinating work and life.

CHAPTER 1: “POETIC MINIATURES” DURING THE THIRD REICH

Early Childhood And Education

Gabriele Renate Bachem was born on May 17, 1916, in Düsseldorf, Germany as the only child of Gottfried and Hedwig Bachem, and final descendant of the famous Rhineland Bachem newspaper and book publishing family.² Her grandfather, Joseph Bachem, is mentioned in the *Meyers Lexikon* for his outstanding service to the genre of Catholic fiction, and possessed a journalistic monopoly over the market for textbooks in Cologne during the last half of the nineteenth century.³ Her father, Gottfried Maria Bachem, was an artist of minor success—“mainly a painter of horses, but also a portraitist” in the Lenbach style of academic realism, which was made popular throughout the German Empire by Munich painter Franz von Lenbach.⁴ Though nearly all of Gottfried Bachem’s work was destroyed during World War II, the few drawings that survive attest to this influence of German realism. As a father, he would aim to transmit his methodical, academic approach to art to his daughter and artistic protégée, and was profoundly influential in fostering her artistic and intellectual development from infancy.

According to Bele Bachem in the autobiographical essay titled “Mein Vater hat mich gewindelt”:

My father gave me the bottle and diapered me. He was a painter. I spent almost the first half of my life with him. Together we read Balzac, Maupassant, Rimbaud—Proust we left out—on the other hand, there was Haeckel and the witch trials. We lived in a house of glass windows, the garden was wild and romantic. My father liked to cook and his appreciation of delicacies transcended the ugly kitchen, where my mother was waiting like a statue of a fearful angel. And so I was pressed still fresh as the morning dew into unknown bosoms. The

² Ulrike Evers, “Bele Bachem,” in *Deutsche Künstlerin des 20. Jahrhunderts: Malerei, Bildhauerei, Tapisserie* (Hamburg: Ludwig Schultheis Verlag, 1983), 13.

³ Günther Böhmer, “Vorwort,” in *Fische: Ein Zyklus* (München: Neue Münchner Galerie, 1986).

⁴ “Pferdemaler in der Hauptsache, aber auch Porträtist.” Lenbach’s portraits of Otto von Bismarck and Pope Leo XIII brought him national acclaim, along with the title, “Münchner Malerfürst.” The somewhat anti-modern brand of Lenbach realism relied heavily on the stylistic influences of Old Masters such as Rubens and Titian to create a distinctly German nationalistic approach to contemporary portraiture that continued to influence the subsequent generation of academic artists. Sonja von Baranow, *Franz von Lenbach: Leben und Werk* (Köln: DuMont Buchverlag, 1986), 7-15.

selection of multiple—mostly prettier—mothers was by no means disagreeable to me.⁵

Bachem's description of her mother as, "statue of a fearful angel" is indicative of their somewhat distant relationship, as Hedwig Bachem is referenced only once in Bele Bachem's autobiographical writings with this short metaphor. This mysterious mother figure is seen in a drawing from 1912 by Bele's father, in which one can observe her father's great artistic skill, and her mother's great beauty, attributes passed on to Bele in equal measures (Fig. 1).

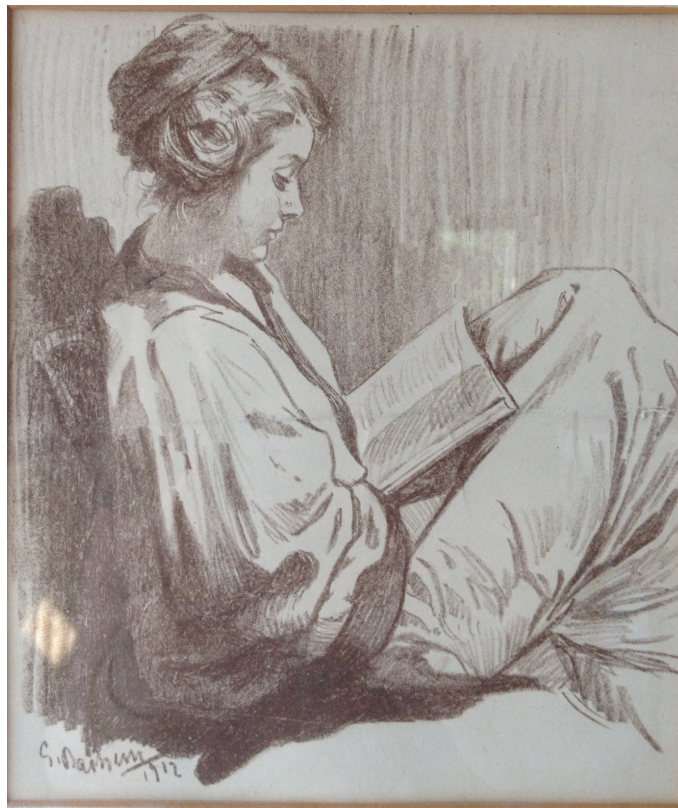


Fig. 1 Gottfried Maria Bachem, *Portrait of Hedwig Bachem*, 1912, pencil, Private Collection of Bettina Böhmer.

⁵ "Mein Vater gab mir die Flasche und hat mich gewandelt. Er war Maler. Fast die erste Hälfte meines Lebens verbrachte ich mit ihm. Wir lasen zusammen Balzac, Maupassant, Rimbaud - Proust ließen wir aus -, hingegen gab es noch Haeckel und Hexenprozesse. Wir lebten in einem Glasfensterhaus, der Garten war wild und romantisch. Mein Vater kochte gerne und sein Sinn für Leckerbissen ging über die hässliche Küche, in der meine Mutter wie das Standbild eines ängstlichen Engels harnte, hinaus. So wurde ich noch taufrisch an fremde Busen gedrückt. Die Auswahl mehrerer Mütter—meist schöner—war mir jedoch keineswegs unlieb." Bele Bachem, "Bele Bachem: Mein Vater hat mich gewandelt," in *Maler der Münchner Kunstszene 1955-1982*, by Hans Kiessling, 434-439 (St. Ottilien: EOS Verlag, 1950/1984), 434-435.

In a 1986 television interview for an episode of the Munich Schwabing documentary series *Frauengeschichten*, Bele speaks of her mother as a “romantic,” but with a “tolerant, self-deprecating character,” who seemed to play only an ancillary role in her early development, and had a tumultuous relationship with Bele’s father that ended in divorce.⁶ Yet, another maternal figure for the young Bele emerged in her “epileptic” aunt, whose eccentric disposition and surreal fairytales would have a significant effect on Bele’s creative development.⁷

As an avid storyteller and lover of fairy stories, Bele’s aunt would revise and personalize fairytales and myths for Bele, often intentionally incorporating anecdotal episodes from reality into her narrative. Her mental instability and chronic medical condition affected the lucidity of these tales, as she created a confusing mythology of fact and fiction for her young niece. Nevertheless, Bele remembers these fairytale adaptations fondly as one of the happiest facets of an otherwise troubled childhood. In interviews, she recalled the frequent and severe punishments she received from both her father and her aunt, who treated her like a “witch,” causing her constant fear.⁸ An anecdote from a 1949 *Der Spiegel* interview with

Bachem supports this notion of her father’s questionable parenting techniques:

Bachem’s father must have been a highly original man of strongly idiosyncratic views after all that his daughter tells of him. He used terror as an excellent educational instrument, filling his pocket with a bag full of live mealworms, and letting the unsuspecting daughter grab them in their swarming and had fun at her fright.⁹

⁶ *Frauengeschichten: Bele Bachem*, directed by Christa Auch-Schwelk (1986; Munich: ARD), television documentary.

⁷ *Frauengeschichten: Bele Bachem*.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ “Vater Bachem muß nach allem, was die Tochter von ihm erzählt, ein hochorigineller Mann von vehement eigenwilligen Anschauungen gewesen sein. Er gab vor, Erschrecken für ein ausgezeichnetes Erziehungsmittel zu halten, steckte sich die Tasche voll lebendiger Mehlwürmer, ließ die ahnungslose Tochter in das Gekrabbel greifen und hatte viel Spaß an ihrem Schreck.” Reindl, L.E., “Phantasien unterm Dach: Sehr Kapriziös,” *Der Spiegel*, October 20, 1949: 31-32.

Often using her fairytales as a coping mechanism to overcome the hardships of her life, Bachem integrated her aunt's unique brand of storytelling in her creative process. As an artist, she continually resorted to this method of filtering reality through the lens of the fairytale, harnessing the medium for its ability to transmogrify the pain and suffering of reality into a dark and autobiographical form of surrealism. An extensive discussion of her late paintings that resulted from the process can be found in Chapter Three.

The Bachems' divorce permanently divided the small family. For her remaining childhood years, Bele lived exclusively with her father, who cycled through "multiple mothers" but never remarried.¹⁰ She spent the majority of her time painting and drawing under the direction of Gottfried, joining him with her child-sized easel as he painted landscapes *en plein air* and often serving as his live model, albeit begrudgingly.¹¹ According to Bele Bachem,

I do not defy my predetermined choice of profession by my father. Not knowing that I was born anyway, without any encouragements or discouragements, to be a painter. He, the father, a painter in his own right, encouraged [me] with the visionary fairy-like prediction: "You will become a second Rubens."¹²

Gottfried made it his personal mission to train his daughter to be the next great artist—to acquire the legacy that he had failed to achieve. Nonetheless, the impact of this paternal vicarious vision for the young Bele Bachem cannot be entirely romanticized. Her father removed her from traditional schooling entirely when she was six, choosing to home school her in a rigorous study of liberal arts with an emphasis on model drawing.¹³ His artistic influence did not come without criticism from Bele, who commented "that his portraits were not so good, because they were too

¹⁰ Bachem, "Bele Bachem: Mein Vater hat mich gewindelt," 434.

¹¹ *Frauengeschichten: Bele Bachem*.

¹² "Den von meinem Vater vorbestimmten Beruf widersetze ich mich nicht. Nicht wissend, dass ich sowieso ohne jedes Zu- oder Abreden als Malerin geboren wurde. Er, der Vater, selber Maler, warf sich verblendet und kühn zu dem Feenspruch auf: 'Du wirst ein zweiter Rubens.'" Bele Bachem, "Bele Bachem über sich selbst," *Bele Bachem*. n.d. <http://bele-bachem.de/rezension/index.html> (accessed March 13, 2013).

¹³ Homeschooling in Germany was and is illegal, and subject to police intervention. Wolfgang Sauré, "Die künstlerischen Paradiese der Malerin Bele Bachem," Einführungsrede von Bettina Böhmer zur Ausstellung "Bele Bachem" (Dresden: Galerie Finkbein, April 15, 2009).

naturalistic. His painting was uncouth.”¹⁴ From an early age, Bachem rejected and rebelled against her father’s style and teaching methods; she did not aspire to become a “second Rubens.”

The complex relationship with Bachem’s father-cum-teacher is the subject of a few of her mature style paintings, such as *Vater und Kind* from 1959 (Fig. 2). Her father, sporting his characteristic handlebar mustache, holds an open book of music with his right hand and rests a whip in the crook of his left elbow. An expressionless Bele stands in his lap, looking blankly at the viewer with a gaze of indifference from her large, almond-shaped eyes. In the background references to her educational curriculum appear with a large leather-bound book and a decapitated wooden mannequin who sits before an empty easel. An aged woman—Bele’s aunt—flies into the composition on a panting unicorn, appearing as a demented fairy godmother. The dark, thundery palette of greys and blues suggests a psycho-dramatic tension between father and daughter, teacher and student. The skewed, upturned perspective of the wooden floor receding into a distant, exposed hallway conveys a sense of overall dysfunction. The house lacking walls and ceilings is ambiguously rendered, simultaneously appearing as an interior room and an exterior façade. In the foreground an unfinished chess game sits on the table. A dead pigeon hangs from a window that opens into the utter darkness of night, permanently suspended between freedom and captivity. A ticking wall clock’s pendulum is agonizingly frozen in mid-swing. The iconographical implication of these objects expresses the fearsome emotional experience of Bachem’s childhood. Her father’s domineering influence manifests as a dark presence in *Vater und Kind*, casting shadows on the landscape of her youth.

¹⁴ “seine Porträts waren nicht gut, sie seien zu naturalistisch gewesen [...] Er malte sie ungeschminkt.” Bachem quoted in Reindl, L.E, “Phantasien unterm Dach,” 32.

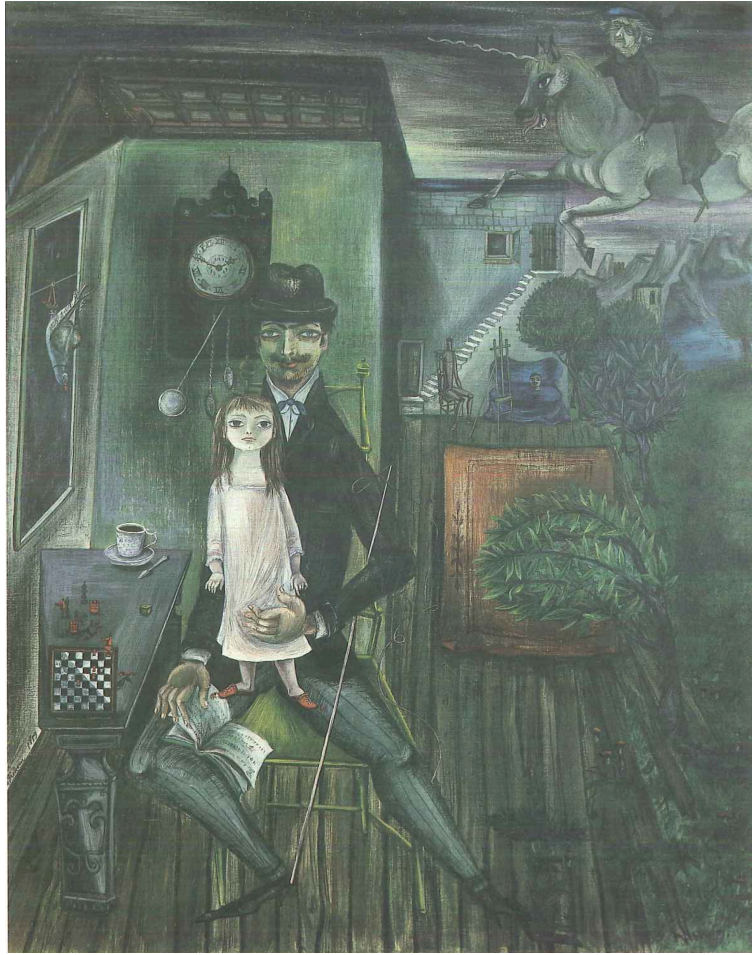


Fig. 2 Bele Bachem, *Vater und Kind*, 1959, casein on wood, 69 x 54 cm.

Under the forceful instruction of her father, drawing became a daily habit that Bele Bachem retained for the rest of her life, which for better or worse, prepared her for future professional success. As visual documents of her dreams and illustrative musings on paper, her drawings provided the foundational fodder of her symbolically complex paintings. In reaction to her overbearing father's vicarious ambition for her, Bele became a tenacious individualist. She developed an idiosyncratic style, opposing her father's academic realism in favor of a more modern, expressive line that would one day make her a household name in both East and West Germany.¹⁵

¹⁵ Bettina Böhmer, interview by Lydia Dorsey, S'Arraco Mallorca, Spain, February 22, 2013.

In 1927 Bele Bachem moved out of her father's home and attended the Deaconess Institution in Kaiserwerth for five years. After years of homeschooling, Bachem found the boarding school to be stifling, as she was not permitted to paint or draw. She ran away twice, and was brought back by the police each time.¹⁶ After boarding school, Bachem studied for a year at the *Kunstgewerbeschule Gablonz* (School of Applied Arts in Gablonz), before dropping out and moving from Düsseldorf to Berlin in 1933 at the age of eighteen. Here, she completed her formal artistic training at the *Akademie der Vereinigten Kunstschulen* (Academy of the United Arts), where she studied under Max Kaus, Ludwig Bertning and Rösner.¹⁷ The artists and teachers of the Academy recognized Bachem's stubborn stylistic individualism in her resistance to the realism required of academic live model drawing. Recalling this experience, Bachem testified that: "Soon I stood out due to my imagination and got an extra table at which I could do what I wanted without correction. So I learned less than necessary."¹⁸ Discouraging her from following the traditional curriculum, and allowing her to train independently, Bachem's teachers ordered her to, "paint and draw your fantasy pictures."¹⁹ Though she began her training at the Berlin Academy drawing over life-size portraits from live models, she began working on a smaller and smaller scale, and her style became less naturalistic and more distorted; she painted portraits of her friends in her so-called "poetic miniatures."²⁰

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Heavily influenced by the German Expressionists, Max Kaus specialized in primitive woodcuts and lithographs. He taught figurative painting while at the *Akademie der Vereinigten Kunstschulen* and supported Bachem's independent study. Franz Roh, *Geschichte der Deutschen Kunst von 1900 bis zur Gegenwart* (Munich: F. Bruckmann Verlag, 1958), 218-219.

¹⁸ "Fiel bald meiner Fantasie wegen auf und bekam einen Extratisch, an dem ich ohne Korrektur tun konnte, was ich wollte. So lernte ich weniger als nötig." Bachem, "Bele Bachem über sich selbst."

¹⁹ "Malen und Zeichnen Sie Ihre Phantasiebilder." Bachem, "Bele Bachem: Mein Vater hat mich gewindelt," 434.

²⁰ Bele Bachem, Unaired interview footage, personal archives of Bettina Böhmer, Mallorca, Spain, tape recording, Munich, 1983.

Bele Bachem's miniature tempera paintings of her Berlin period are executed in a deliberately naïve style that unapologetically abandons realism, often simplifying the human figure and distorting perspective. Whimsical carnival scenes figure heavily in the series *Auf dem Rummelplatz* (*At the Fairground*) from 1938, and convey a sense of inter-war *joie de vivre*. Depicting lively human interaction in a playground of carousels, Ferris wheels, and sideshow acts, these scenes are bursting with the positivism and enthusiasm of a young artist at the advent of her career. The condensed perspective and crowded composition of *Auf dem Rummelplatz II* (Fig. 3) allude to Bele's rejection of academic technique; the use of stark black outlines and simplified forms, hallmarks of her early work, suggests the influence of "naïve" artists such as Henri Rousseau, as well as Gabriele Münter's *Blaue Reiter* Expressionism. Bachem's miniatures of this prewar period betray a false sense of happiness and security, as the social, political, and cultural repression of Nazi Germany would escalate to outright tyranny, where individualist artistic expression became a dangerous, even deadly endeavor.



Fig. 3 Bele Bachem, *Auf dem Rummelplatz II* (*At the Fairground II*), 1938, tempera, 20 x 17 cm.

German Art Under the Third Reich

Bele Bachem's move to Berlin in 1933 coincided with the ascent of the National Socialists to power with Adolf Hitler at the political helm. Art played a significant role in the propaganda and overall mission of cultural cleansing by the Nazi totalitarian regime in much the same way as it did in the Soviet Union, but the fury with which the government suppressed and condemned modern art was without precedent.²¹ Recalling the stifling cultural climate of Germany during the Third Reich, historian Helmut Lehmann-Haupt asserts: "such a monopolization of the entire creative potential of a people, of every aesthetic instinct, such subjugation of every current of its productivity and its capacity for artistic experience to the purposes of the leader of collective society does not exist before the present century."²²

Prior to 1933, artists such as Ernst Ludwig-Kirchner championed a distinctly Germanic brand of modernism, rivaling that of dominating movements of French Cubism and establishing Berlin and Munich as centers of European *avant-garde*. Catalyzed by the events of World War I, Germany experienced a renaissance of artistic thought and production dominated by the founding movements of Expressionism—*Der Blaue Reiter* (The Blue Rider) and *Die Brücke* (The Bridge)—along with the inception of modernist Bauhaus aesthetics. During the Weimar period, *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) and Dada arose in opposition to the arguably optimistic and unrealistic goals of the previous generation of modernists, indicting the political corruption of Germany's Weimar government and challenging the role of art itself. However, the economic problems compounded by the national humiliation of World War I contributed to the indictment of modern German art as "intellectual, elitist, foreign [...] and linked to the economic

²¹ Stephanie Barron, *Degenerate Art: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1991), 9.

²² Helmut Lehmann-Haupt, *Art under a Dictatorship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954), 45-46.

collapse which was blamed on a supposed international conspiracy of Communists and Jews.”²³ These sentiments informed the *Deutscher Kunstbericht* (German Art Report), published in 1933 by Hitler’s second-in-command and head of the newly established *Reichsministerium für Volksaufklärung und Propaganda* (Reich Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda), Joseph Goebbels. This five-point manifesto outlines the government’s official attitude towards German art, sanctioning the banning, removal, and public burning of “all works of a cosmopolitan or Bolshevist nature.”²⁴ Although Goebbels had initially tolerated some forms of German Expressionism—seeing it as the embodiment of the spirit of Hitler youth—he began his attack against all forms of modernism with the confiscation of *entartete* (degenerate) art and books and subsequent public burning of all of the undesirable material.²⁵ The term, *entartete* (degenerate) has an untranslatable pejorative and racial connotation—meaning biologically and fundamentally inferior—and it gave validation to the rhetorical propaganda of the National Socialist campaign to cleanse the nation of undesirable, impure art. Being labelled *entartet* became a deadly designation for intellectuals, and the campaign culminated in the “most virulent attack ever mounted against modern art,” with the 1937 *Entartete Kunst Ausstellung* (Degenerate Art Exhibition).²⁶

On July 19, 1937, the National Socialists opened the Munich exhibition *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art). Containing over 650 sculptures, paintings, and books, the show attracted two million visitors over its four-month run. It represented the culmination of the Nazi campaign of persecution of modern art. This legendary pejorative multimedia showcase was organized to praise the acceptable Third Reich-approved art of “heroic realism” by condemning the depraved

²³ Barron, *Degenerate Art*, 11.

²⁴ The *Kunstbericht* manifesto also prohibits the construction of all “box-like buildings,” presumably directed at Bauhaus-style architecture. Ibid., 13.

²⁵ Ibid., 12.

²⁶ Ibid., 9.

“un-German” art of movements such as Cubism, Surrealism, and Expressionism.²⁷ The Nazi effort to “purify” German culture resulted not only in the confiscation of “degenerate art,” but also the firing of artists, museum directors, and public officials who had contributed in any way to the promotion of cultural degeneracy.²⁸

At the opening of the *Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung*, which exhibited the “triumph of German art in the Third Reich,” Adolf Hitler espoused the Nazi attitude towards “degenerate art” that would define the cultural climate of Germany for the next eight years:²⁹

From now on we are going to wage a merciless war of destruction against the last remaining elements of cultural disintegration...Should there be someone among [the artists] who still believes in his higher destiny—well now, he has had four years’ time to prove himself. These four years are sufficient for us, too, to reach a definite judgment. From now on—of that you can be certain—all those mutually supporting and thereby sustaining cliques of chatterers, dilettantes, and art forgers will be picked up and liquidated. For all we care, those prehistoric Stone-Age culture-barbarians and art-stutterers can return to the caves of their ancestors and there apply their primitive international scratchings.³⁰

This companion exhibition to *Entartete Kunst* displayed the National Socialists’ standards for appropriate German art that was established on the stylistic models of neoclassical and neoromantic art of the nineteenth century. Favoring the idealization of the human form to depict Aryan superiority, the *Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung* reinforced the concept of a “true art” that projected the moral values, standards of beauty, and overall power of National Socialism. Works such as *Die vier Elemente (The Four Elements)* (Fig. 4) by Hitler’s favorite artist, Adolf Ziegler, exemplify the aesthetic ideals that insisted upon “beauty without sensuality.”³¹ The four nudes of the large triptych are rigorously executed in a neoclassical style, and the stark,

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 10.

²⁹ Ibid., 17.

³⁰ Adolf Hitler, speech at the opening of the Haus der Deutschen Kunst, Munich, July 18, 1937; cited and translated in Lehmann-Haupt, *Art under a Dictatorship*, 76-77.

³¹ George L. Mosse, “Beauty without Sensuality,” in *Degenerate Art: The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1991), 25.

unembellished character of their pristine bodies negate the inherent sensuality of the female form. This canon of State-approved art, stylistically and ideologically similar to the socialist realism espoused by Soviet Russia, imposed aesthetic totalitarian control over the inter-war generation of avant garde artists. Though an entire flourishing generation of German art movements would be vehemently suppressed through the systematic persecution and seizure of their “degenerate art” by the *Propagandaministerium* (Ministry of Propaganda) under Joseph Goebbels, young artists like Bele Bachem emerged on the scene and subverted the Nazi systems of cultural control, albeit in a manner that was discreetly disguised in veiled triteness.³²



Fig. 4 Adolf Ziegler, *Die vier Elemente* (*The Four Elements*), before 1937, oil on canvas, three panels, left to right: 170.3 x 85.2, 171 x 190.8 cm, and 161.3 X 76.7 cm, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Sammlung Moderner Kunst in der Pinakothek der Moderne.

³² This artistic escapism compels comparison with the attitude of “*innere emigration*” (internal exile) that many Germany writers of the Nazi period experienced in which they censored themselves in order to avoid persecution.

Bachem's First Success and Wartime Experience

In this time of Nazi cultural oppression, the young, unknown artist Bele Bachem initially struggled to gain recognition in the art community of Berlin. However, the artist's stubborn stylistic individualism, which was sidelined at the Berlin Academy, provided the groundwork for her first professional success. In 1939, Bachem gained national exposure with the publication of her "poetic miniatures" in German women's magazines such as *Die Dame*, *Elegante Welt*, and *Neue Linie*.³³ By the age of twenty-four she was able to extricate herself from the anonymous mass of young, emerging artists, achieving national acclaim for her idiosyncratic style: "With one blow she was famous and [her publishers] had more orders than they could run."³⁴ Her images became so popular that they were republished by the prominent Woldemar Klein Publishers in a series of postcards the same year, launching the artist's career from struggling art student to professional artist.³⁵ "Like lightning Bachem had become a household name for Berlin."³⁶ These life-affirming scenes of everyday life—though somewhat banal in style and theme—appealed to the broader German public for their simplicity and optimism. As she explained, "the first pictures were miniatures, full of love and happiness, in a time of learning to fear. I, too, was afraid and painted the way I wished it to be."³⁷ The success of her published images garnered both positive and negative exposure, as her rise to prominence paralleled the rise of the National Socialists. It was only a matter of time before Bachem's work attracted the

³³ Originally published by Ullstein, *Die Dame* was a glossy sophisticated periodical for the new German woman. Its issues covered topical commentaries on fashion, including detailed discussions of the latest trends in clothing, accessories, and hairstyles, and extensive coverage of film and celebrities. Hans Reinhardt, "Bele Bachem geboren in Düsseldorf," in: Hans Kiessling: *Begegnung mit Malern. Münchner Kunstszene 1955-1980* (St. Ottilien, 1980), 412.

³⁴ "Mit einem Schlage war sie berühmt und hatte mehr Aufträge, als sie ausführen konnte." Bernt Engelmann, "Bele Bachem." In *66 Zeitgenossen: berühmt, bestaunt, bewundert* (Dortmund: Ardey Verlag, 1966/67), 35.

³⁵ Ulrike Camilla Gärtner, *Bele Bachem: Werkverzeichnis 1935-1986* (Munich: Verlag Galerie Wolfgang Ketterer München, 1986), 404.

³⁶ "[Z]ündeten wie ein Blitz. Schlagartig war Bachem für die Berliner zu einem Begriff geworden." Reinhardt, "Bele Bachem geboren in Düsseldorf," 412.

³⁷ "Die ersten Bilder waren Miniaturen, voll von Liebe und heiter, in einer Zeit des Fürchtenlernens. Auch ich fürchte und malte die Wunschwelt." Bachem, "Bele Bachem über sich selbst."

attention of the Ministry of Culture; “Bachem’s calendar-images style, her graceful kindness, their unrealistic nature did not at all fit into the time in which the ‘Haus der Kunst’ threw its prescribed hulking shadow.”³⁸

During her final years in Berlin before the outbreak of the Second World War, Bachem met art historian and future husband, Günter Böhmer while working in the basement of an art shop on Lützowplatz where she painted watercolors from steel engravings. According to Böhmer, “Because of this mindless activity, she had the idea to paint what she preferred—a momentous decision, which nothing and no one could command to stop, a train of lemmings, so to speak.”³⁹ Bachem experienced an intellectual attraction to Böhmer, as he was not only a scholar of art and literature, but an amateur artist and photographer. Böhmer specialized in the collection of Biedermeier art, and in his later career wrote extensively on theater puppets.⁴⁰ Naturally, an artist-critic relationship developed between the emerging artist and the art historian; Böhmer relentlessly criticized her work, correcting her perspective or denigrating her compositions. She ripped up many of her paintings and drawings after his aesthetic censure, forcing herself to make his revisions. Though she resented much of his feedback, he became her “*Nachlernschule* (post-learning school),” pushing her to improve the technical skills she had failed to learn at the Academy.⁴¹

Bele Bachem and Günter Böhmer married in 1940 and gave birth to their first and only child, Bettina, later that year. Bachem happily recalls her first year of marriage and motherhood with the statement, “die Liebe war das Kind (the love was the child).” However, this short period

³⁸ “[d]ie Kalenderbilder Bachemschen Stils, ihre anmutige Liebenswürdigkeit, ihre unrealistische Art überhaupt, paßten nicht in die Zeit, in der das “Haus der Kunst” seine vorgeschriebenen klotzigen Schatten warf.” Reindl, L.E, “Phantasien unterm Dach,” 31.

³⁹ “Spätestens bei dieser stumpfsinnigen Tätigkeit kam ihr die Idee, lieber selber zu malen—ein folgenschwerer Entschluß, dem nicht und niemand Einhalt gebieten konnte, ein Zug der Lemminge sozusagen.” Günther Böhmer, “Vorwort,” in *Fische: Ein Zyklus* (München: Neue Münchner Galerie, 1986).

⁴⁰ Bettina Böhmer.

⁴¹ *Frauengeschichten: Bele Bachem*.

of success and happiness quickly ended as the harsh reality of World War II hit home for Bachem. In 1941, Bele Bachem experienced a personal tragedy with the death of her father in the bombing of Düsseldorf. His entire oeuvre of paintings was destroyed and his legacy was lost. Despite the magnitude of these events, Bele's surviving work produced during these years expresses no sadness or loss. Bele Bachem often spoke of the hardships of the Nazi era, but her paintings and drawings of this time remain deceptively optimistic.

Unable to engage in the unrestricted experimentation of her predecessors, Bachem operated—for a few years—under the radar of the Ministry of Propaganda. With her seemingly banal miniatures, painted from 1936 to 1945, she seemed to be consciously avoiding incendiary subject matter. Though her naïve style was in no way subservient to the conservative aesthetic preferences of the National Socialists, her saccharine “poetic miniatures” *Monat-Serie: Januar bis Dezember* (*Month Series: January through December*) from 1941 earned her popular success. In this series, Bachem depicts each month through whimsical vignettes envisioning the seasonal pleasures of German life free from wartime concerns and anxiety. Nevertheless, the docile subject matter of the miniatures, which often refer to *fête champêtre* scenes of pastoral and urban harmony, afford a glimpse of Bachem's later erotic style. In *Juli* (July) (Fig. 5), for example three female bathers, one of which reclines seductively under an umbrella in the foreground, inhabit a richly vegetated paradise of a palatial garden. The fluid rendering of the nudes in the background recalls the figures of Henri Matisse's 1905 painting, *Le bonheur de vivre* (*The Joy of Life*) (Fig. 6), which celebrates the sensual pleasures of life through the eroticized female form. Though *Entartete Kunst* managed to eradicate many of the supposed culturally perverse avant garde artists of the Third Reich, Bachem's poetic miniatures

inconspicuously oppose the iconography and style of the “Blut und Boden” (blood and soil) ideals of National Socialist art that embraced realism, moralism, and militarism.⁴²

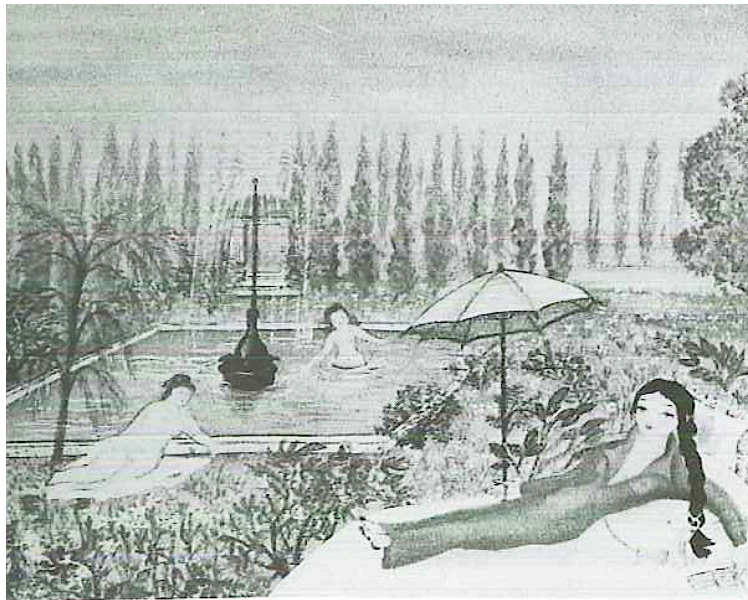


Fig. 5 Bele Bachem, *Juli* from *Monate-Serie: Januar bis Dezember* (Month Series: January through December), 1941, tempera on paper, 16 x 20 cm.



Fig. 6 Henri Matisse, *Le bonheur de vivre* (*The Joy of Life*), 1905-6, oil on canvas, 175 x 241 cm., Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia, PA.

⁴² The term “Blut und Boden” refers to the nineteenth-century expression of the proto-Nazi ideals of racial purity (blood) and national pride (soil), which served as the propaganda slogan for the National Socialist campaign of ethnic cleansing and nationalism through the embrace of the rural values of the heroic German peasant. Mosse, “Beauty without Sensuality,” 26.

The same year, 1941, Bele Bachem's husband was drafted into military service, and she was left to support Bettina on her own. During the war, Bachem worked a series of odd-jobs to earn a living. She was employed in an antique shop, painted carpets for a Romanian shop owner, and produced freelance fashion designs. At night, she claims to have earned money by entertaining a sickly Indian man. Placing herself as Scheherazade in her visual retelling of the famous Arabic folktales, Bachem seems to have been inspired by this personal episode to paint the tempera series, *Tausendundeine Nächte* (One Thousand and One Nights) from 1942. In this series of twelve miniatures, the influence of Indian miniature painting from the Mughal Empire runs strong, evident in the exquisite detail and use of vivid color. The rich vegetation and use of outlining once again evoke the work of Henri Rousseau, whose prints hung in Bachem's studio.⁴³ The "magical" quality of this series is elaborately described in Annemarie Verweyen's 1991 article, "Die tausendundein Träume der Bele Bachem":

Their scenic representations, immediate atmospheric images with imaginative descriptions and local colors give the reader a part of the thousand dreams of Bele Bachem incorporated in a magical way into the nights of the Slaves of Love. Indian palaces with ever-changing interior and exterior spaces and dummy-like magical perspectives embark on an inner life, "which trembles before it and at the same time it burns to reveal itself to us." Windows, terraced, arcade-like, highly placed in the air, open views of lush vegetating, cloud-crowned, in their fullness rather surreal landscapes—they increase the erotic aura of [these] playful, graceful miniatures.⁴⁴

These tempera scenes do not directly correspond to specific stories from the *Tausendundeine Nächte*, but images such as the *Nude Female Bather in an Oriental Garden* (Fig. 7) convey the

⁴³ *Frauengeschichten: Bele Bachem*.

⁴⁴ "Ihre szenischen Darstellungen, unmittelbare Stimmungsbilder mit vorstellbaren typischen Ortsbeschreibungen, landesüblichen Kolorits, vermitteln dem Leser einen Teil der tausendundein Träume Bele Bachems, die in zauberhafter Weise einfließen in die Nächte der Sklavinnen der Leibe. Indische Paläste mit beständig wechselnden Innen- und Außenräumen und attrappenartigen Zauberperspektiven bilden Einsteige in ein Innenleben, "das zugleich davor zittert und darauf brennt, sich uns zu enthüllen." Fenster, Arkaden, terrassenartige, hoch in die Luft plazierte Standorte öffnen Ausblicke auf üppig vegetierende, wolkengekrönte, in ihrer Fülle recht unwirkliche Landschaften—sie erhöhen die erotisierende Ausstrahlung der spielerischenmutigen Miniaturen." Annemarie Verweyen, "Die tausendundein Träume der Bele Bachem," *Illustration 63: Zeitschrift für die Buchillustration* (April 1990): 3-4.

exotic milieu of *Tausendundeine Nächte* in lush detail, featuring a wide array of flora and fauna in an idealized landscape of a distant palace and placid sea. Bachem enhances the erotic content of the scene with the introduction of a male voyeur, who lustfully gazes at the oblivious female bather from his flowering perch. Other scenes, such as the *Man Presenting the Head of a Slain Man to His Mistress* (Fig. 8), recall the nineteenth-century French Orientalist painting tradition, juxtaposing of despotic brutality with sensual nudes of the harem, as Bachem contrasts the violence of a beheading with the eroticism of a reclining female. Though Bachem received no immediate acclaim for this series of tempera miniatures, they were published in 1981 in the book *Vom Sklaven der Liebe: Die Schönsten erotischen Geschichten aus Tausendundein Nächte* (*On the Slaves of Love: The Most Beautiful Erotic Stories from the Thousand and One Nights*).⁴⁵



Fig. 7 Bele Bachem, *Nude Female Bather in an Oriental Garden* from *Tausendundein Nächte*, 1942, Tempera on paper, 30 x 28 cm.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 3.



Fig. 8 Bele Bachem, *Man Presenting the Head of a Slain Man to His Mistress* from *Tausendundein Nächte*, 1942, Tempera on paper, 30 x 28 cm.

Bachem's Entrance into Munich Theater

Bele Bachem's poetic miniatures attracted the attention of Otto Falckenberg, one of the most important theater directors in Munich. Though the war raged on and most artists could not find work, Bachem was offered a position as a set designer for the Munich production of *Minifie* in 1943.⁴⁶ Accepting work in such a publicly prominent industry was dangerous, as wartime theatrical productions, like all other creative mediums, were severely censored and suppressed by Joseph Goebbels' Ministry of Propaganda. Much of the censorship and elimination of "undesirable" persons from the theater industry took place in the early years of the Reich, from 1933-1938, and ongoing productions were rigorously vetted for any anti-Nazi or anti-Nationalist content. However, both Hitler and Goebbels embraced the medium of theater for its propagandistic potential. As John London observed in his study *Theatre Under the Nazis*, "[o]f

⁴⁶ Gärtner, *Bele Bachem: Werkverzeichnis 1935-1986*, 404.

all the activities subsidized by the Propaganda Ministry, theater was the most privileged, even above active, direct propaganda [;] [t]icket prices were reduced by up to half [...] in 1942 audiences doubled from ten years earlier.”⁴⁷ Typical productions of this period dealt with heroic themes, such as “self-sacrifice in battle above family ties,” glorified the “concept of a chosen leader, upheld the idea of total war and propagated the *Volkgemeinschaft* (People’s Society).”⁴⁸

Despite the imminent risk of a ban by the Propaganda Ministry, Bele Bachem accepted the job, as she desperately needed the money to provide for her daughter, and began working on her first *Bühnenbilder* (set designs). She found herself in a unique place, as one of the only women working in the industry, and she was harassed and criticized by the male stage technicians and designers for her use of exaggerated perspective.⁴⁹ Her early days working in the theater were difficult, and she confessed that she would often labor at night to avoid the criticism and influence of her colleagues.⁵⁰ She captured her theater experience in the following poetic prose:

One often wonders how I have arrived at stage scenery.
Falkenberg was the stage manager.
It was brave because when he wrote to me, I was 23 years old and there were just thumbnail images published in magazines by me.
To accept for me was a leap of faith.
The technical director and stage manager also laughed about my understanding of perspective and the invention of the buildings—and the play was by Hömberg—Minifie, it was called.
Tailoring also became difficult. But my being young helped me. They let me do it—and even the costume, which was simply “nudity”—shoes, stockings and scarf, and jewelry was all I conceded to the role.
That was under the eyes of the Nazis. The big stage curtain, which seemed in my opinion not good enough, so I painted on the night before the premiere. And lo and behold, it was a success—so in remembrance of this after the war, many stage commissions came to me.

⁴⁷ John London, “Introduction,” In *Theatre under the Nazis*, edited by John London, 1-53 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 15.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 29.

⁴⁹ *Frauengeschichten: Bele Bachem*.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

And through this work, I arrived by chance at modeling. For Baroque gardens were often a theme that I had to make, and there was a lack of garden sculpture in the props, so I made them myself, from papier mâché.⁵¹

Notwithstanding her initial problems, both with the execution of the designs and with her male colleagues, Bachem's idiosyncratic style prevailed. Bachem's work for Falckenberg earned her a reputation in the industry for her modern stage designs that outlasted the war. Her expressive, whimsical style was marketable, and she became a commodity for postwar theater in Munich, designing stage sets, costumes, and production posters until the mid-seventies.

Though her set designs shaped her reputation in Munich, the publicity led to a publication ban by the Nazis in 1945, forcing her to cancel an exhibition of her paintings. According to Bachem, "They disliked my pictures, as I dislike the Nazis." Yet, according to the 1949 *Der Spiegel* article "Phantasien unterm Dach" (Fantasies in the Attic), a "great lord" of the Ministry of Propaganda gave the young artist a high official warning and then expressed the private wish to purchase her paintings.⁵² She painted another poetic miniature in 1945, presumably in response to this event titled *Kulturminister besucht die Künstler* (*Minister of Culture Visits the Artists*) (Fig. 9), in which she employs her playful miniature style to capture the irony of her situation. Without the title, the scene would appear as a happy intrusion of an elderly male visitor on a dining party of young Bohemians. Bachem seems to portray herself as the figure on the far

⁵¹ "Oft fragt man, wie ich zum Bühnenbild gekommen sei/ Falckenberg war der Inszenator/Es war mutig, denn als er mich ansah, war ich 23 Jahre alt und es waren gerade Miniaturbilder von mir in Zeitschriften veröffentlicht worden/Zuzusagen war für mich ein Sprung ins kalte Wasser/Die technischen Leiter und Inspizienten lachten auch über meine Auffassung von Perspektive und die Erfindung der Gebäude—das Stück war von Hömberg und hieß—Minifie/Auch die Schneiderei stellte sich schwierig. Doch mein Jungsein half mir. man ließ mich gewähren—ja sogar das Kostüm, was schlichtweg "Nacktheit" war—Schuhe, Strümpfe und Schal und Schmuck war alles, was ich der Rolle zugestand/Das war unter den Augen der Nazis. Den großen Bühnenvorhang, der mir nicht gut genug schien, malte ich in der Nacht vor der Premiere nach. Und siehe da, es wurde ein Erfolg—so kamen in Erinnerung daran nach dem Krieg viele Bühnenbildaufträge auf mich zu/Und durch diese Arbeiten kam ich so neben bei zum Modellieren. Denn Barockgärten waren oft ein Thema, das ich zu gestalten hatte, es fehlte an Gartenplastik in der Requisite, so machte ich sie selber, aus Pappmache." Bele Bachem, "Oft fragt man, wie ich zum Bühnenbild gekommen sei," In *Bele Bachem: Ein Leben der Kunst gewidmet*, 33-34 (Rolandseck: Galerie Rolandshof, 1984), 33-34.

⁵² "Die möchten meine Bilder nicht, so wie ich die Nazis nicht möchte." Reindl, L.E., "Phantasien unterm Dach," 31.

left, sporting a chic turtleneck and holding an infant. Employing ironic optimism in her miniatures, Bachem romanticizes reality, translating hardship into playful visual tales.



Fig. 9 Bele Bachem, *Kulturminister besucht die Künstler* (*Minister of Culture Visits the Artists*), 1945, tempera on paper.

Trouble for the emerging artist would continue when her Berlin studio was bombed, destroying all of her art supplies and many of her paintings. Bachem recalls, “The war devoured our men, and ate up all of the cities down to the skeleton. Everything was lost. I fled to the countryside with my small daughter.”⁵³ Bachem, along with thousands of other displaced Berliners, found refuge in the countryside of southern Germany, where she and Bettina lived with her in-laws on the shores of Starnberger Lake, and for a short time in Feldafing. Because of the chaos following the end of World War II, Bachem could not work at this time, but continued to paint her miniatures, many of which she sold to American soldiers to buy food. The

⁵³ Der Krieg verschlang unsere Männer, und fraß ganze Städte bis aufs Gerippe auf. Alles war verloren. Flucht auf Land mit meiner kleinen Tochter. Bachem, “Bele Bachem über sich selbst.”

unrelenting optimism of her work from the early forties is replaced by a darker palette and a pessimistic tone, seen in work such as *Der Wilddieb (The Poacher)* (Fig. 10) from 1945. A mustachioed livestock thief is seen fleeing a farmhouse with stolen sheep in a barren landscape dominated by subdued hues of umber and grey. The gloomy atmosphere of the scene is conveyed through the ominous sky of blue and black, punctuated by a streak of red as dawn breaks over the desolate farmland. Though Bachem created her “fantasy pictures” in an effort to cope with the cultural oppression of the Nazis, her personal experiences of the final years of the war had a permanent psychological effect on the artist. Barren landscapes and shells of bombed buildings infiltrate her paintings as visual memories of the destruction and devastation of World War II.

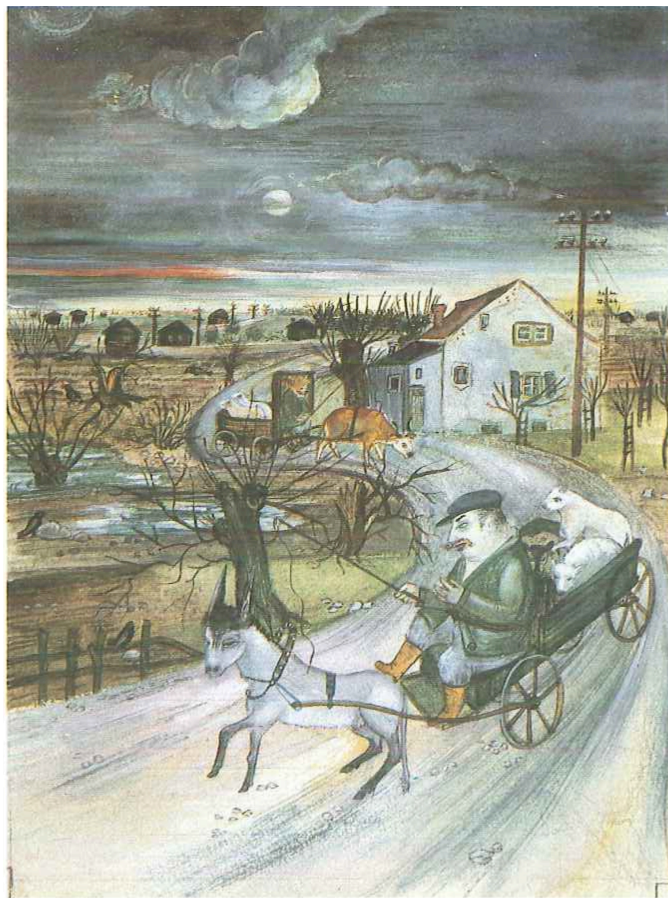


Fig. 10 Bele Bachem, *Der Wilddieb (The Poacher)*, 1945, tempera on paper.

Günter Böhmer's homecoming in 1945 from his service in the war was bittersweet, and the stress of poverty and the postwar devastation negatively affected their relationship. The two permanently separated in 1947, and Bele and Bettina left the countryside for Munich where they lived together in a one-bedroom apartment—the only place they could afford. Munich sustained serious damage from the war, but the move proved to be advantageous for Bachem's career, as there was a demand for skilled artists. This marked the beginning of a new chapter for Bachem, as she would make Munich her permanent home, finding herself quite comfortable within the Schwabing bohemian scene of artists and writers for the rest of her career.

After the war, Bele Bachem held a debut exhibition in Kikio Haller Gallery in Zurich in 1947.⁵⁴ As the entire country struggled to recover from the pervasive devastation of the war, Bele Bachem remained resourceful, using her Munich connections to find work. During this postwar period, she demonstrated a high degree of versatility, working in numerous mediums and adapting to the demands of the market for commercial design and decorative aesthetics. In the next chapter I will outline Bele Bachem's impressive body of commercial and fine art created during the fifties and the sixties, arguing that her idiosyncratic style became a staple for the West German consumer due to its uniquely optimistic postwar perspective and playful eroticism.

⁵⁴ Gärtner, *Bele Bachem: Werkverzeichnis 1935-1986*, 404.

CHAPTER 2: POSTWAR COMMERICAL WORK AFTER THE *WIRTSCHAFTSWUNDER*

The Postwar German Condition

Midnight of May 8, 1945, marked the so-called “*Stunde Null*” for Germany. The National Socialists had surrendered, and World War II was finally over. This term, meaning “zero hour,” did more than signify the end of the War; it defined the immediate postwar German collective consciousness that sought to eliminate the pervasive influence of the Third Reich from all facets of German life. Allied forces began a campaign of “de-Nazification,” systematically removing all symbols of the National Socialists from public view, as German citizens struggled with the devastating loss and guilt left in the wake of Third Reich.⁵⁵ Despite the efforts to erase the evidence of the Nazis from the building facades of Germany, the inescapable reality of postwar Germany was a country in shambles. Eleven percent of the population had perished in the War, food production was only fifty-one percent of its pre-war capacity, and widespread poverty and hunger was the norm. In his 1955 book *Mainsprings of the German Revival*, Henry Wallich recalls the desperate situation, saying, “Each day, and particularly on weekends, vast hordes of people trekked out to the country to barter food from the farmers [...] hungry people traveled sometimes hundreds of miles at snail’s pace to where they hoped to find something to eat. They took their wares—personal effects, old clothes, sticks of furniture, whatever bombed-out remnants they had—and came back with grain or potatoes for a week or two.”⁵⁶ Along with high inflation, devastating damage to major infrastructure, and substantial financial and intellectual reparations, the German economy needed to be entirely restructured and rehabilitated. After the Potsdam Conference in August 1945, Germany ceased to be a united

⁵⁵ Stephanie Barron, “Blurred Boundaries: The Art of Two Germanys between Myth and History,” in *The Art of Two Germanys: Cold War Cultures*, edited by Stephanie Barron and Sabine Eckmann (New York: Harry Abrams, Inc., 2009), 12-15.

⁵⁶ Henry C. Wallich, *Mainsprings of the German Revival* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), 65.

nation and was divided into four military occupation zones between the United States, Britain, France, and Russia that eventually were divided into the Soviet controlled Deutsche Demokratische Republik (DDR) of East Germany and the Bundesrepublik Deutschland (BRD) of West Germany. It was proposed that the Germany economy would be agriculturally based, and as a result many industrial factories were dismantled or destroyed. The new beginning for Germany, both East and West, seemed bleak.

For the surviving generation of German artists—arguably a “lost” generation in its own right—this concept of a new beginning for Germany favored the exploration of ideological dichotomies such as “autonomous versus political art, national versus international styles, individualist versus collectivist approaches, and the use of rational versus expressive forms,” and by challenging these opposing themes, German artists sought to create a new national identity.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, like the German nation itself, the prominent postwar artistic styles were dichotomously opposed into two distinct aesthetic ideologies: conceptual abstraction versus figurative expression. In an attempt to distance themselves from the figurative social realism of the art of the National Socialists, many postwar West German artists, such as the Zero Group, favored total abstraction and conceptualism, and were inspired by the international styles of American Abstract Expressionism and *Art Informel*. The *Junge Wilden* challenged the national and historical amnesia of conceptual abstraction.⁵⁸

The Female Postwar Condition and Beate Bachem

In 1947, Beate Bachem emerged again on the postwar Munich art scene with an autonomous, individualist and expressive style that in many ways opposed both East and West

⁵⁷ Sabine Eckmann, “Ruptures and Continuities: Modern German Art in between the Third Reich and the Cold War,” in *Art of Two Germanys: Cold War Cultures*, edited by Sabine and Stephanie Barron Eckmann, (New York: Harry Abrams, Inc., 2009), 49.

⁵⁸ Barron, “Blurred Boundaries,” 14-15.

German contemporary art with its distinctive eccentricity and rejection of international abstraction. Her figurative style fashionably defied the pessimism of the postwar Neo-Expressionism, reflecting the popular aesthetic of the fifties and sixties with its decorative, playful line. Despite the hardships of the early years after the war, her extreme versatility lent itself to commercial work, and after gaining notoriety for her stage designs, her talent was in high demand during the years of economic recovery after the *Wirtschaftswunder* (Economic Miracle). Beginning with an invitation to design for Rosenthal Porcelain, Bachem was inundated by commissions from German theaters, movies, and textile and domestic interior designers. She became a household name in Germany and an icon in Munich, even gaining recognition in the United States for her multimedia talents. For more than twenty years, Bele Bachem's style became a national staple, as its graceful whimsy pervaded all facets of popular culture and inspired optimism in rather difficult times. Berlin reporter and journalist, Monika Buttler's autobiography, *Das Hitler-Ei*, reflects on her childhood experience during the economic miracle years with a remark referring to Bele Bachem as "the utility artist who cheered the entire world with [everything from] book designs to wallpaper [...] cone lamps, kidney tables and cocktail sets." Seeing Bachem's designs throughout the homes of her friends' parents, Buttler's sentiment supports the notion that Bachem's style was a staple in Germany. Appearing in various forms throughout the common middle-class home further exemplifies the ubiquity of Bele Bachem's work throughout Germany.⁵⁹

The optimism that typified the commercial aesthetic in postwar West Germany, provided a means of artistic escapism for Bele Bachem. Reflecting on her personal experience of postwar Germany, Bele Bachem poetically describes her postwar mindset: "The trees were black and

⁵⁹ "[...] die Gebrauchs-künstlerin heiterte damals die gesamte Einrichtungswelt vom Bucheinband bis zur Tapete auf [...] Tütenlampen, Nierentische und Cocktail-Garnituren." Monika Buttler, *Das Hitler-Ei* (Munich: Buch & Media GmbH, 2005), 126.

bare. The houses were cracked, they became my wounds. I painted. The images became larger and darker, possessed by black, green and umber. The coldest of all blues, which it tolerated, was supported by darkness and was thrown into the middle of the magical, mysterious lights, which corresponded to my thoughts. Meanwhile I treated myself to the orgies of the imagination and playfulness in porcelain and stage sets.”⁶⁰ Like many German women after World War II, Bachem struggled to provide food, shelter, and financial security for herself and her young daughter, Bettina. Yet, the end of the war meant an end to her publication ban by the Nazis, and Bachem was one of the first German artists to exhibit her work outside of the country with her 1947 exhibition at the Kikio Haller Gallery in Zurich, Switzerland.⁶¹ Though the show was a success, as Bachem sold all of her paintings, she continued to design sets for theater productions in Munich and struggled to make a living. Faced with the reality of the difficult postwar economy, the vehemently individualistic artist reluctantly accepted commissions for commercial work—“selling out” to make ends meet. Though she was admittedly unenthusiastic about working in the mainstream, decorative aesthetics, her first commercial job for Rosenthal Porcelain proved to be invaluable to Bachem’s career, as both the company and the artist acquired national recognition for their collaborations in fine porcelain during the fifties and sixties.

With the loss of nearly an entire generation of able-bodied German men, women in devastated urban areas such as Berlin and Munich contributed to the recovery effort by clearing the rubble from the war-ravaged streets—a profession so prevalent that the term *Trümmerfrau*

⁶⁰ “Die Bäume waren schwarz und kahl. Die Häuser hatten Risse, es wurden meine Risse. Ich malte. Die Bilder wurden größer und dunkler, von schwarz und grüner Umbra besessen. Das allerkälteste Blau, welches sie duldeten, wurde vom Dunkel in die Mitte geworfen und bekam das magische, unheimliche Leuchten, was meinem Denken entspricht. Indessen leistete ich mir die Orgien des Verspielten und der Phantasie in Porzellan und Bühnenbildern.” Bachem, “Bele Bachem über sich selbst.”

⁶¹ Gärtner, *Bele Bachem: Werkverzeichnis 1936-1986*, 408.

was coined, literally meaning “rubble woman.” During the war, these women toiled in traditionally male jobs, and were now undertaking the physical and mental challenge of rebuilding their country and restoring normalcy block by block. The significance of this term has a broader symbolic connotation than just a designation of female manual labor. Rubble women symbolized the national sentiments of “hard work, economic reconstruction, and a literal clearing away from the events of the recent past” and “captured the nation’s imagination” with their selflessness and resilience that defined the postwar spirit.⁶² However, the self-sufficient, strong female identity of rubble women would be undermined through the social attitudes of the economic miracle years, as German women were encouraged to be “consumers, homemakers and mothers” by the images and advertisements of popular media.⁶³

Although West Germany struggled initially to recover from the enormous social, economic, and fiscal consequences of World War II, the election of Chancellor Konrad Adenauer in 1949 precipitated the *Wirtschaftswunder* (Economic Miracle) that followed. Along with Minister of Economics, Ludwig Erhard, Adenauer championed the *Soziale Marktwirtschaft* (Social Market Economy) and effectively de-Nazified the West German economy by eliminating Nazi-era price controls and rations, reducing marginal tax rates, and implementing currency reform, replacing the inflated Reichsmark with the Deutsche Mark. In the following years, “[t]he spirit of the country changed overnight. The gray, hungry, dead-looking figures wandering about the streets in their everlasting search for food came to life.”⁶⁴ Industrial production began to

⁶² Mark E. Spika, *Selling the Economic Miracle: Economic Reconstruction and Politics in West Germany, 1949-1957* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2007), 15.

⁶³ Ibid., 15.

⁶⁴ Wallich, *Mainsprings of the German Revival*, 71.

recover, absenteeism plummeted, wages rose, and the overall economy was systematically resurrected from its *Stunde Null* collapse.⁶⁵

Due to the changes affected by the *Wirtschaftswunder*, West Germans gained confidence in the new, more valuable Deutsche Mark and began actively participating in the economy, which in turn contributed to the overall growth of the middle class in the fifties. According to Mark Spicka, author of *Selling the Economic Miracle: Economic Reconstruction and Politics in West Germany 1949-1957*, West Germans embraced a new national identity based on consumerism and materialism that favored the female “consumer citizen” and the male “producer citizen.”⁶⁶ This “creation of ideal economic roles [...] laid the foundation for a new, gendered West German identity that offered an escape from the recent past through economic reconstruction.”⁶⁷ Opposing the model of the Soviet-controlled economy in East Germany, West German women relished their newfound buying power, and the demand for commercial goods skyrocketed. This female consumer mindset contributed to the success of Bachem’s commercial work in the fifties and sixties, as her whimsical decorative designs for Rosenthal Porcelain and other housewares and textile companies appealed to the postwar West German *Hausfrau* (house wife).

Bachem’s 1949 *Der Spiegel* Cover

Attempting to restore a sense of normalcy, the German press, which had been under the complete control of the Nazi propaganda machine, also had to reestablish itself. Magazines such as *Der Spiegel* (*The Mirror*) were conceived as the German equivalent to American publications such as *Life* and *Time*, with its heavily photographic issues and eye-catching covers. *Der Spiegel*, which was founded in Hanover as a weekly periodical, received one of the very first

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Spicka, *Selling the Economic Miracle*, 15.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 15

press licenses from Allied Forces and published its first issue in 1947. The magazine endeavored to provide German readers with objective news reporting for the first time in decades. According to the “Spiegel-Statute” published in 1949, “everything processed and recorded in *Der Spiegel*, news, information, facts must be completely true. Every message and every fact is [...] meticulously verified.”⁶⁸ As its name and mission suggests, the liberal-leaning *Der Spiegel* is still known today for its investigative journalism, especially in politics, and academic style of writing, along with its many photographs and dutiful coverage of arts and culture.

On October 20, 1949, Bele Bachem once again became a national star when she appeared on the cover of this rapidly-expanding, progressive periodical with the subtitle “Karrusselpferd Gesucht (Carousel Horse Wanted)” (Fig. 11). Displaying a page from her sketchbook and coyly glancing over her shoulder, the young Munich-based artist embodies the resilience and optimism espoused by *Der Spiegel* in its attempt to boost national morale through the celebration of postwar German culture. Joining other successful female actors, fashion designers, and athletes featured on the cover of *Der Spiegel* during the immediate postwar years, Bachem regained the national exposure that had been stifled by the war. The featured article, titled “Phantasien unterm Dach,” describes her as “a small person with one of the most graceful noses of the age, this willful and wanton painter,” and features a reproduction of one of her latest paintings, *Die kranke Muse (The Sick Muse)* (Fig. 12).⁶⁹ Bachem’s painting features a beautiful bed-ridden woman surrounded by doting figures in an outdoor bedroom located on the vast plane of a countryside with a cloudy, darkened sky, similar to *Der Wilddieb* (Fig. 9). According to the article, the painting was inspired by one of Bachem’s friends and fellow painter, Utescher

⁶⁸ “Alle im Spiegel verarbeiteten und verzeichneten Nachrichten, Informationen, Tatsachen müssen unbedingt zutreffen. Jede Nachricht und jede Tatsache ist [...] peinlichst genau nachzuprüfen.” Statute appearing in every issue of *Der Spiegel* since 1949.

⁶⁹ “kleinen Person mit einer der graziösesten Nasen der Epoche, dieser eigen- und mutwilligen Malerin.” Reindl, L.E., “Phantasien unterm Dach,” *Der Spiegel*, 31.

Kirschner, who fell ill and found so much pleasure in the company of her concerned friends that she put on her fanciest nightgown and played sick for a few more days. The title references Charles Baudelaire's mid-nineteenth century poem of the same name, *La Muse malade*, in which Baudelaire laments the demise of the "Christian" modern muse in the shadow of the classical muse of antiquity.⁷⁰ Though Bachem retains the naïve style of her miniature painting, nonsensical and surrealistic elements, such as the bull playing a harp and the ambiguous space of the open-air sickroom in an idealistic landscape, make their debut in Bachem's oeuvre in the late forties. For the rest of her career, Bachem continually blurred lines between fantasy and reality, painting her inner dream world with increasing detail and complexity.



Fig. 11 Bele Bachem on the cover of *Der Spiegel*, "Karusselpferd Gesucht," (Carousel Horse Wanted), October 20, 1949.

⁷⁰ Susan Blood, *Baudelaire and the Aesthetics of Bad Faith* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 86-87.



Fig. 12 Bele Bachem, *Die Kranke Muse* (*The Sick Muse*), 1948, Tempera, 28 x 35 cm.

The article portrays Bachem as a quirky, up-and-coming painter of “a child-like ethereal sphere,” ending finally with an explanation of the article’s title, “Karussellpferd Gesucht,” saying, “What Bachem wishes for her studio is a special kind of seating: it should be a carousel horse, a real one, which has done its duty at carnival games, one with a past.”⁷¹ This article proved to be invaluable to Bachem’s career, as she would receive a fortuitous invitation from the renowned Rosenthal Porcelain.

⁷¹ “eine so kindhaft entrückte Sphäre.” “Was sich Bele Bachem fürs Atelier wünscht, ist eine besondere Art von Sitzgelegenheit: Es soll ein Karussellpferd sein, ein echtes, das auf Jahrmarktsspielen seinen Dienst getan hat, eines mit Vergangenheit.” Reindl, L.E., “Phantasien unterm Dach.”

The Ascent of Rosenthal Porcelain

The Rosenthal Porcelain Company reached its height of popularity in the 1950s with its pioneering, contemporary product designs, which became fixtures in the china cabinets of German middle-class households. Yet, Rosenthal's ascent to success in the mid-twentieth century spans a seventy-year history. Establishing its legacy of the "highest standards of quality" in the industry, Rosenthal not only survived two wars, but also rapidly adapted to the changing aesthetic tastes from the conservatism of the nineteenth century to twentieth century modernism.⁷² Singularly concerned with fashionable aesthetics and design—producing both utilitarian and fine art objects—Rosenthal was continually inspired by contemporary art movements—from French Baroque to Pop Art. In 1950, they began recruiting fine artists—Bele Bachem being one of the first—to contribute the decorative designs for the Bauhaus-inspired modern forms of porcelain. By upholding this legacy of quality and style with a progressive approach to aesthetics, Rosenthal dominated the market for porcelain in Germany for nearly forty years. The following abbreviated history of Rosenthal traces the company's stylistic and business developments that culminated with their triumphant success in 1950—due largely to the contributions of Bele Bachem—and serves to contextualize the Rosenthal brand and its significance in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Germany. By examining the stylistic developments in Rosenthal porcelain, which closely paralleled advances in contemporary art, an understanding of the evolution of popular aesthetic taste and contemporary art in Germany can be gained.

In 1879, Rosenthal Porcelain produced its first successful product—an ashtray with the self-referential label, a "Ruheplätzchen für brennende Zigarren (little resting place for burning

⁷² Roy Strong, *Rosenthal: A Century of Porcelain* (New York: Rosenthal AG, 1984), 2.

cigars)” (Fig. 13).⁷³ Philip Rosenthal, founder of the small company, successfully capitalized on the zeitgeist of the day with this kitschy product, and Rosenthal porcelain evolved from its cottage-style beginnings into the top producer of the industry by catering to the tastes of the emerging bourgeoisie at the turn of the century.⁷⁴



Fig. 13 Rosenthal Ashtray, “Ruheplätzchen für brennende Zigarren” (little resting place for burning cigars), 1879, painted porcelain.

Though Rosenthal’s earliest designs relied heavily on traditional French Baroque and Empire style aesthetics, a reaction against the staunch “academic historicism” of the previous century heralded by the turn-of-the-century popularity of the Art Nouveau movement prompted a more expressive and organic design aesthetic in Rosenthal porcelain, with design names such as

⁷³ *Der Spiegel*, “Rosenthal-Porzellan: Die Bedarfsweckungstour,” *Der Spiegel*, May 9, 1956, 20.

⁷⁴ Strong, *Rosenthal: A Century of Porcelain*, 4.

“Flora” and “Iris.”⁷⁵ For the first time, the company abandoned conservative design aesthetics and capitalized on a contemporary style. This tactic distinguished the growing company from larger competing manufacturers, such as Meissen. This art-conscious, market-savvy approach was abandoned with the outbreak of World War I, and Rosenthal resorted to producing unornamented, functional “military crockery” to support the war effort—yet again demonstrating their brand’s adaptability.⁷⁶

In the wake of the First World War, Rosenthal suffered financial losses and produced lines of neo-Baroque luxury vases and tableware with elaborate painted ornamentation in an attempt to overcome their postwar deficit. However, these gilded pastiche designs were, for the most part, stale and unsuccessful. As a result, Rosenthal supplemented their Art Department in the mid-twenties with more modern-minded designers to reflect the changing social attitudes and aesthetic tastes of inter-war Germany.⁷⁷

In the late-twenties and early thirties, the company continued to manufacture their neo-Baroque ornamental lines, but also produced a contrasting line of “plain style” designs. This trend towards more modern, unornamented shapes was a reflection of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* mindset of a “new practical simplicity, as an expression of the reaction against the loss of individuality within contemporary society—particularly amongst the general public—for sentimentality.” Rosenthal also commissioned a series of specialty “expressionistic sculptures” by artists such as Milly Steger and Gerhard Schliepstein that ranged from maudlin dancing girls to edgy, angular female nudes that resemble the distorted bodies of Ernst-Ludwig Kirchner’s Expressionist portraits.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ *Der Spiegel*, “Rosenthal-Porzellan,” 21.

⁷⁶ Strong, *Rosenthal: A Century of Porcelain*, 5-6.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

In 1934, Philip Rosenthal's Jewish heritage threatened the fate of the company. He voluntarily resigned from his position as chief executive of the company and was forced to Aryanize his company, giving two thirds of it to a twenty-four-year-old man named Udo Frank.⁷⁹ Two years later, the eighty-one-year-old founder of Rosenthal was declared mentally unfit and was placed under guardianship, and died in a Bonn sanatorium in 1937. During the remaining years of the war, Rosenthal returned to the unornamented functionalism of their World War I designs, producing mostly utilitarian products. The arrival of Philip Rosenthal Jr., who spent the war years in America, signified a change towards a more modern aesthetic. Though he did not join the company until 1950, when he became the publicity manager and head of the board of directors, his influence made Rosenthal the most successful company in the industry.⁸⁰

After the destruction and economic fallout of World War II, the ailing porcelain company was at a decisive turning point. Though their factories had suffered little damage, their equipment was outmoded, and their once innovative designs were now irrelevant and stale. Instead of regurgitating designs that reinterpreted the traditional, conservative style of the past, Philip Rosenthal ushered in a new design philosophy to create "Originals of Our Time" (*Das Originale unserer Zeit*)—new classics inspired by the diversity of contemporary art and abandoning the stylistic canon of the past.⁸¹ A quote from the 1951 issue of "Rosenthal Verkaufsdienst" (Rosenthal Sale Service) expresses the new postwar spirit of Rosenthal:

For the past 25 years we have heard nothing but the loud cry for "objectivity," "expedience," and "functionalism"...and now, all of a sudden, we see in Milan how artists and designers, far from being hampered by such inhibitions or

⁷⁹ Udo Frank eventually acquired the entirety of Rosenthal's shares totaling 1.417 million dollars, but had to sell them due to the legislation regulating the use of Jewish property. The majority of Rosenthal was owned by the Bavarian Mortgage and Exchange Bank, which maintained control throughout the 1950s. Though Philip Rosenthal Jr. and his mother maintained ownership of only eleven percent of the shares after the War, the Director General of the Bank delegated control of Rosenthal's Board to Philip Rosenthal Jr., thus reinstating the family to its former position of power. *Der Spiegel*, "Rosenthal-Porzellan," 20.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 22.

restricted schools of thought, have willingly and freely succumbed to the already long prevailing urge—an urge extant just as much in Germany as anywhere else—for a movement away from sheer austerity of style towards a more playful, cheerful, colorful and decorative manner of expression.⁸²

With a new motto, “Bound by tradition, but free to innovate,” Philip Rosenthal Jr. championed an export-reliant business model in which more products would be marketed and sold in America, where he had lived and become familiar with the market during the war years. The re-establishment of a Rosenthal stake in the American market was crucial, and Rosenthal seized the opportunity to revitalize the brand to suit the more progressive tastes of the postwar consumer. Modern art once again became the inspiration for their new lines, and the stylistic conservatism of the war years under the National Socialists was replaced by the asymmetry, dynamism, and color of their new collections that reflected the youthful postwar spirit. By manufacturing more affordable product lines with modern, decorative designs, Philip Rosenthal strove to expand domestic demand for their distinctive designs by catering to the growing market of middle-class female consumers in both West Germany and the United States, which proved to be a lucrative move.⁸³

In 1950, Philip Rosenthal hired a group of the finest European artists to contribute designs to Rosenthal’s new, modern-minded lines. The first group included prominent artists such as Jean Cocteau from France, Tapio Wirkkala from Finland, and Beate Bachem, whose 1949 *Der Spiegel* cover had propelled her into the national spotlight and onto Philip Rosenthal’s radar.⁸⁴ As the only female recruit to Rosenthal’s first stable of modern artists, Bachem was

⁸² Strong, *Rosenthal: A Century of Porcelain*, 10.

⁸³ In the 1950s, one plate from the Royal Porcelain Factory in Berlin service “Breslauer Stadtschloss” cost more than a fifteen-piece coffee service by Rosenthal. Though both Rosenthal and Nymphenburg capitalized on the growing middle-class market with more affordable lines, Nymphenburg appealed more to “rich Americans and the industrialists in the Rhine and Ruhr” with its more conservative “modern” designs. *Der Spiegel*, “Rosenthal-Porzellan,” 23-24.

⁸⁴ Ann Kerr, *Rosenthal: Excellence for All Times, Dinnerware, Accessories, Cutlery, Glass* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing, 1998), 10.

initially reluctant, as she wanted to focus on her independent compositions, but the opportunity offered the financial security that her independent production of paintings did not. Working for Rosenthal with varying intensity over the next decade, she was not only able to expand her skills to the field of applied arts, but Rosenthal also provided her with a more prominent and accessible market for her work, which further enhanced her reputation as an artist, albeit within the commercial sphere. Collaborating with Swiss artist Hans Theo Baumann, who designed many of the porcelain pieces, Bachem decorated dozens of dining and tea service collections, along with numerous porcelain figurines, vases, and collectables. The recruited artists worked within the Rosenthal factory under the close supervision of various porcelain professionals, learning how to translate their fine art skills into the applied art of porcelain painting and glazing. Rosenthal's innovative approach of allowing artists to fully participate in the design, application, and production of their porcelain ware—as opposed to passively submitting designs to be executed by a third party—resulted in distinctive collections that challenged the aesthetic traditions of conservative porcelain and distinguished Rosenthal's unique designs from their competitors. The company was further bolstered by the publicity it received from commissioning high-profile modern artists.

On May 9, 1956, Philip Rosenthal Jr. appeared on the cover of *Der Spiegel* looking irresistibly dapper with a large lacquered pipe before shelves of distinctively shaped black and white porcelain vases (Fig. 14). The corresponding feature article, titled “Die Bedarfsweckungstour (Tour to Incite Demand),” celebrates the success of the company under its new management, combining an interview with the son of the founder and director and a critical history of the company and its legacy.

In it, Rosenthal summarizes his marketing approach towards middle-class housewives, saying, “Only the possession of fine porcelain creates the domesticity of that cultured fluid, which belongs to a lady like her perfume.”⁸⁵ This marketing of porcelain as a vestige of femininity is further echoed in a 1954 Rosenthal sale primer by saying,

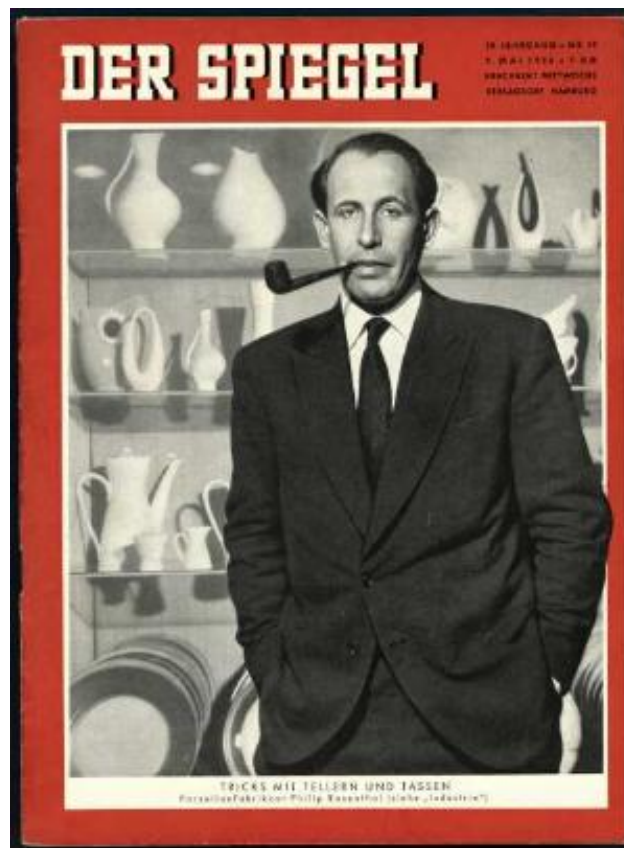


Fig. 14 Philip Rosenthal Jr. on the Cover of *Der Spiegel*, “Tricks mit Tellern und Tassen,” (Tricks with Plates and Cups) May 9, 1956.

You will notice less than fifteen percent of families have really beautiful china, but want it eagerly. Genuine silver and bone china are something like a halo for every woman, young or old. But it has different causes for each woman, and it is important to know all the reasons why china is part of the charm and personality of a woman like her clothes, her jewelry and her perfume. These various reasons are: prestige, quality, beauty, romance, investment and family tradition.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Erst der Besitz edlen Porzellans schafft in der Häuslichkeit jenes kultivierte Fluidum, das zu einer Dame gehört wie ihr Parfüm, *Der Spiegel*, “Rosenthal-Porzellan,” 24 .

⁸⁶ “Sie werden feststellen daß weniger als 15 Prozent aller Familien wirklich schönes Porzellan besitzen, es sich aber sehnlichst wünschen. Echtes Silber und echtes Porzellan haben so etwas wie einen Glorienschein für jede Frau, ob jung oder alt. Es hat aber bei jeder Frau verschiedene Ursachen, und es ist wichtig, alle Gründe zu kennen, warum Porzellan zum Charme und zur Persönlichkeit einer Frau gehört wie ihre Kleider, ihr Schmuck und ihr Parfüm.

The stylistic and business decisions of Rosenthal's new manager in the postwar years came under severe criticism by the company's more traditional competitors. "Rosenthal's fad will soon fade away again, because there is a lot of desperation in it," said the Director of the Royal Porcelain Factory in Berlin.⁸⁷ The criticism of their "trendy" designs is further reflected in the words of the Director of the Nymphenburg Factory: "We have done modern things since 1900 and have since then repeatedly used contemporary artists. But to assess what Rosenthal is doing now, these are delicate matters of taste. One must distinguish between the modern and the trendy."⁸⁸ Despite the criticism of the competition, Rosenthal's pioneering Studio Line of affordable and collectable porcelain sets designed by fine artists proved to be a huge success, earning Rosenthal the top position in the industry for the next three decades. With the opening of their boutique showrooms called "*Rosenthal Studio Häuser*," (Rosenthal Studio Houses) and the official introduction of the "*Rosenthal Studio-Linie*," (Rosenthal Studio-Line) the company appealed to middle class consumers with the "*Originale unserer Zeit*" (Originals of Our Time) motto that marketed their products not only as a quality investment, but a signifier of social status. Rosenthal continued its tradition of commissioning porcelain designs from fine artists, continuing with lines by Fantastic Realist Ernst Fuchs in the 1980s.⁸⁹ Yet the high demand for Rosenthal's porcelain in the fifties and sixties slowly waned, resulting in eventual failure, as the

Diese verschiedenen Gründe sind: Prestige, Qualität, Schönheit, Romantik, Investition und Familientradition." Quoted in *Der Spiegel*, "Rosenthal-Porzellan," 24.

⁸⁷ "Rosenthals Modewelle wird bald wieder abklingen, denn es ist viel Krampf dabei." Quoted in *Ibid.*, 23.

⁸⁸ "Wir machen moderne Sachen schon seit 1900 und haben seit dieser Zeit immer wieder zeitgenössische Künstler mit herangezogen. Aber das zu bewerten, was Rosenthal jetzt macht, das sind heikle Geschmacksfragen. Man muß da wohl zwischen modern und modisch unterscheiden." *Ibid.*, 20.

⁸⁹ Strong, *Rosenthal: A Century of Porcelain*, 18.

once leading producer of German porcelain filed for bankruptcy in 2009, with accusations of being “too big for a niche market, too small for a global one.”⁹⁰

Bachem’s Designs for Rosenthal Porcelain

Rosenthal’s mission to market the aesthetics of their new lines to middle-class women was bolstered by the unique, feminine designs of Bachem, whose contributions are also mentioned in a pivotal featured article in *Der Spiegel*:

[Philip Rosenthal] is constantly looking for new, talented artists, even though the range of Rosenthal’s décor is quite variegated. It ranges from the amusing burlesque of Bachem from Munich to the overly abstract figurations and arabesques that resemble twisting loops, and calligraphic flourishes to the pattern of golden rays chosen by Persian Empress Soraya for her table setting. They are often executed in delicate pastel colors; it seems like jewelry is randomly scattered across plates and vessels. Sometimes only the curves are accentuated, because it might interfere with the sensitive eater if bizarre Bele Bachem figures or abstract entities shimmer like leeches looking through the gravy.⁹¹

In 1952, Bele Bachem appeared in a short *Wochenschau* newsreel featuring Rosenthal’s new stable of contemporary artists. She is seen confidently applying paint directly to a blank vase, accentuating its modern curves with fluid lines as she charms the camera with her coy, quiet smile. Decorated with a pareidolic fish design, which recalls the dual anthropomorphic visual association methods of surrealists Salvador Dalí and Max Ernst, the *Vase with Fish Motif* (Fig. 15) that appeared in the newsreel exemplifies the playful designs that Rosenthal produced and marketed to appeal to its female consumers. A quote referencing Bachem’s porcelain designs

⁹⁰ Jens Von Hartmann, “Too big for a niche market, too small for the global one,” *Die Welt*, January 30, 2009 <http://www.welt.de/english-news/article3120683/Too-big-for-a-niche-market-too-small-for-the-global-one.html> (accessed March 23, 2013).

⁹¹ “Er ist ständig auf der Suche nach neuen begabten Künstlern, obschon die Palette der Rosenthalschen Dekore recht buntscheckig ist. Sie reicht von den amüsanten Burlesken der Münchnerin Bele Bachem über abstrakte Figurationen und Arabesken, die Zwirnschlaufen ähneln, und kalligraphische Goldschnörkel bis zu dem Goldstrahlenmuster, das sich Persiens Kaiserin Soraya für ihr Tafelgedeckerkor. Die oft in zarten Pastellfarben gehaltenen Schmuck-Elemente wirken wie zufällig über Teller und Gefäße gestreut. Manchmal begnügt man sich damit, nur die Rundungen zu dekorieren, weil es empfindliche Esser stören könnte, wenn skurrile Bele-Bachem-Figuren oder wie Blutegel aussehende abstrakte Gebilde durch die Bratensoße schimmern.” *Der Spiegel*, “Rosenthal-Porzellan,” 24.

appeared in a 1954 issue of the Canadian business magazine *Canadian Saturday Night*, which states, “china painting is either decorative or severely simple. Somewhere in between comes Bele Bachem who combines an impudent sense of humor with strong modern virility. She can paint a nostalgically Victorian scene with a whimsical touch [...] or she can be humorously modern as in the face created by fishes.”⁹² Gaining international recognition for her extraordinarily versatile style, Bachem’s Rosenthal designs transition from kitschy and decorative to bizarre and surreal with an iconography ranging from idyllic nature scenes to grotesque chimerical animals.



Fig. 15 Bele Bachem for Rosenthal Porcelain, *Vase with Fish Motif*, ca. 1952, porcelain, 24 cm.

⁹² "Art Review," *Canadian Saturday Night: A Magazine of Business & National Affairs* (Parkan Publications, 1954): 34.

Bele Bachem's early Rosenthal collaborations from 1951-1955 are comprised mostly of decorative vases and fruit serving dishes featuring delicate female figures executed in a modern, yet illustrative style, as seen in *Fruit Plate with Female Musicians* (Fig. 16). Fancifully dressed in sheer drapery and elaborate, wide-brimmed hats, the two masked musicians pose with stringed instruments. Their provocative stance forms a sophisticated cross-shaped composition, accentuated by a striking amorphous sky blue backdrop. With its tame sensuality and subdued pastel tints of rose and blue, the dish exudes femininity. The pleasurable imagery of the piece compels its user to indulge in the pleasures of life, to drink, eat, and be merry.



Fig. 16 Bele Bachem for Rosenthal Porcelain, *Fruit Plate with Female Musicians*, ca. 1952, painted porcelain, 18 x 18 cm.

In 1951-1952, Bachem completed a series of figurative porcelain statuettes, whose sentimental forms border on kitsch. Featuring maudlin sets of childlike male and female figures swooning in the company of docile forest animals and playful manifestations of characters from

Greek mythology, Bachem's figurines convey the happiness of a classically inspired pastoral life of pleasure—far removed from the urban concerns of postwar life. As Bachem's first venture into a three-dimensional medium, the crudeness of the figurines' corporeal forms reveals both her deliberate naivety and her lack of skill in the medium. Many of the human forms are clumsily rendered and positioned awkwardly, as in the *Kind auf Widder* (*Child on Ram*) (Fig. 17) while others exude naïve elegance, such as the *Daphne* figurine (Fig. 18), which is more successful in both form and decorative accent. Bachem captures the magical transformation of the mythological Greek nymph with ironic simplicity. The inherent charm of these Rosenthal figurines, though somewhat unrefined, reflects the popularity of kitsch in decorative art in both Germany and America.



Fig. 17 Bele Bachem for Rosenthal Porcelain, *Kind auf Widder* (*Child on Ram*), 1951, painted porcelain 17x12 cm.



Fig. 18 Bele Bachem for Rosenthal Porcelain, *Daphne*, 1951, painted porcelain, 17 cm.

Bele Bachem's subsequent designs of the later 1950s are comprised of miniature-inspired scenes of rural fecundity featuring images of young, beautiful women happily picking fruit. This motif is exemplified in Bachem's *Fruit Dish with Woman Picking Grapes* (Fig.19), which was released as part of a collectible six-plate fruit service series. The superficial banality of the design with its pastel palette and bucolic motif bolsters its mass marketability, while the juxtaposition of the sensuous female body with ripened fruit evokes subconscious associations of the sexual consumption of the fertile, young female body. With playful imagery and tame eroticism, Bachem's decorative motifs offered the porcelain market a uniquely feminine alternative to counter the functional modernism of the Bauhaus-inspired designs of her male Rosenthal colleagues.



Fig. 19 Bele Bachem for Rosenthal Porcelain, *Fruit Dish with Woman Picking Grapes*, 1955, painted porcelain, 26 cm.

Other Bachem designs from the late 1950s and early 1960s cater even more explicitly to the female domestic market, referencing the iconography of the stereotypical *Hausfrau* with romantic motifs representing marriage, cooking, and domestic harmony. Seen in Bachem's 1958 *Hochzeitsschälchen mit Perlrand* (*Wedding Dishes with Beading*) (Fig. 20), graceful caricatures of bride and groom appear on the two smaller dishes, along with a gallant series of groomsmen dancing on the larger rectangular ashtray. Other series, such as *Maxim's Service* of dinnerware (Fig. 21), feature female figures that are composed of food items, from produce to seafood, alluding to the nurturing, reproductive qualities of the female sex. Many of the other early designs by Bachem feature purely decorative motifs of doves and swans, vines and roses, butterflies and cherubs, and dainty gloved hands. The formulaic usage of female-oriented

imagery on domestic objects served to reinforce the stereotypical female gender role of *Hausfrau*. Promoted by much of Western society after the war, the idealized and romanticized image of the female domestic goddess-consumer was pervasive throughout postwar media. Decorative arts of the fifties endorsed marriage, motherhood, and consumerism as mainstays of female identity. Especially in West Germany, the formulaic images of delicate, seductive, carefree women visually countered the postwar female identity of the traumatized but ultimately resilient *Trümmerfrau*. Though Bachem's early contributions to Rosenthal maintain a degree of this thematic and iconographic conservatism in her representation of the female, she gradually asserted her own artistic identity in commercial designs.

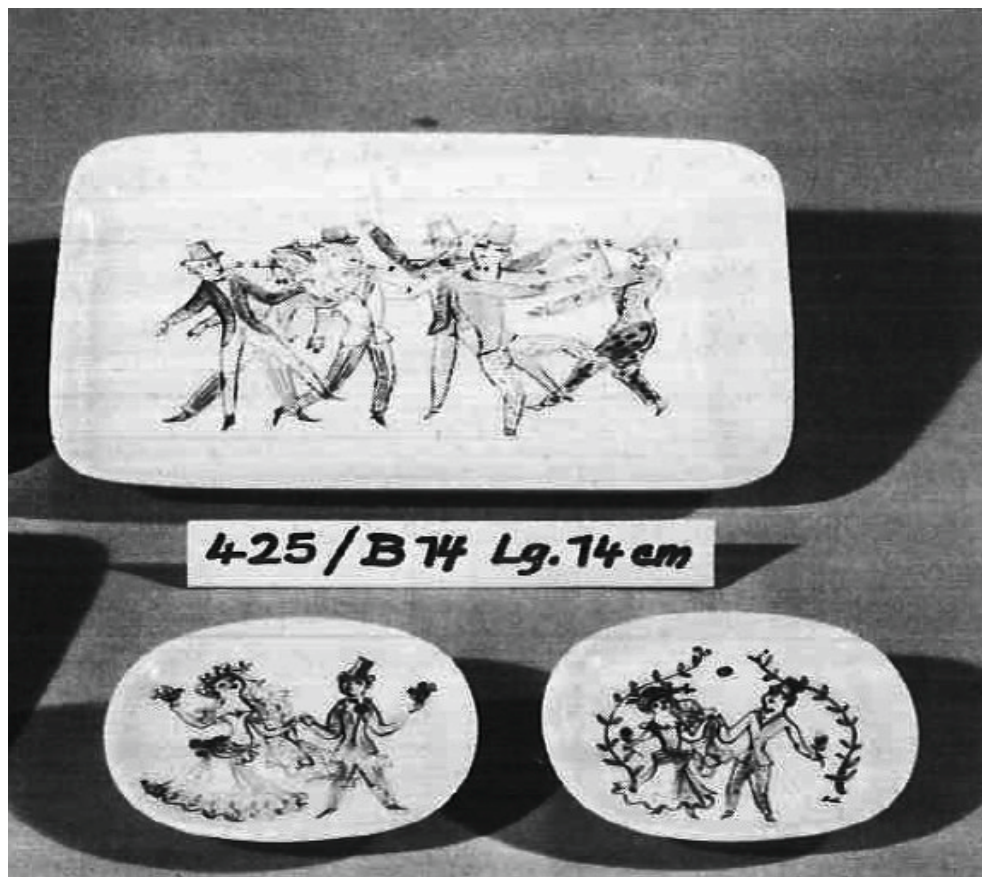


Fig. 20 Bele Bachem for Rosenthal Porcelain, *Wedding Dishes Set*, Ashtray (top) 14 cm x 11 cm *Hochzeitsschälchen mit Perlrand* (Wedding Dishes with Beading) (bottom) 6.5 cm, 1958, painted porcelain.



Fig. 21 Bele Bachem for Rosenthal Porcelain, “Maxim’s Service,” 1960, painted porcelain.

In the sixties, Bachem’s Rosenthal designs moved away from the commercial triteness of the kitschy, saccharine style of the fifties in favor of more eccentric ornamentation. Employing bacchanal, circus, and frankly bizarre motifs, Bachem’s later designs demonstrate a thematic transition from fecund, passive characterizations of femininity to whimsical animated fantasies, as well as a stylistic transition from soft, delicate embellishment to a bolder, expressive line. This new approach is exemplified in the 1966 *Zirkus Teeservice* (*Circus Tea Service*) (Fig. 22), where bears and dogs dance in human clothing and a cat wearing a hat plays the violin, while flowery female equestrians gracefully dance on the backs of prancing horses. Some of the depictions border on the grotesque, as seen in the lion and cat figures with large almond-shaped eyes and human-like features. In other collections, such as the *Plate with the Makkaroniesser* (Macaroni Eater) from the 1961 *Carousel Service* (Fig. 23), the designs incorporate playful surrealism; here, for example, a street performer plays an outlandish serpentine trumpet that wraps around his

body like a snake, as a cat jumps out of the horn. Many of the designs, including this one, feature lines of poetry written by Bachem, which create a decorative border of script and humorously reference the painted figures of the designs with nonsensical inscriptions such as, “This one is no macaroni eater, otherwise he’d handle the trumpet better. And yet it’s a stuffed trumpet and one knows not—bad boys—what would the musician do if he did not trumpet.”⁹³ The eccentric, surrealistic designs of Bachem’s later porcelain designs more accurately represent the idiosyncratic character of the artist’s style. However, they lacked the marketability of her earlier work. Artists like Raymond Peynet, who worked for Rosenthal from 1955 to 1965, continued to produce kitschy, saccharine porcelain designs to fulfill the demands of the popular market.⁹⁴



Fig. 22 Bele Bachem for Rosenthal Porcelain, “Zirkus” Teeservice, 1966, 16 pieces, painted porcelain.

⁹³ “Der hier ist kein Makkaroniesser, sonst hantierte er das Trompete besser. Doch ist es eine Stopf-Trompete und man weiß nicht—böse Buben—was der Musikus täte, wenn er nicht trompetete.”

⁹⁴ Kerr, *Rosenthal: Excellence for All Times, Dinnerware, Accessories, Cutlery, Glass*, 33.



Fig. 23 Bele Bachem for Rosenthal Porcelain, *Plate with the Makkaroniesser* (Macaroni Eater) from “Caroussel” Service, 1961, painted porcelain.

Due to her artistic versatility, Bachem adapted her characteristic style to appeal to the popular consumer tastes of West German society in the years following the economic miracle, taking advantage of the demand for aesthetic optimism to counter the trauma of World War II. Though she sacrificed the pursuit of her independent artistic goals, Bele Bachem’s commercial work allowed her to rise to national success along with Rosenthal, and as a result, she occupied a unique position in the postwar years. As a working female artist and single mother, she resisted the female stereotype of *Hausfrau* that was espoused by Western German popular culture, and embodied the resilient and resourceful spirit of the *Trümmerfrau*. Yet, not only was Rosenthal porcelain strategically marketing their porcelain lines to female housewives, but the nature of

Bachem's designs further reinforced this social model of a woman. Though it is not entirely clear under what circumstances Bachem discontinued her collaboration with Rosenthal in the late sixties, the aesthetic transition evidenced in her later Rosenthal work toward surrealism and eccentricity parallels the artist's personal stylistic and thematic developments into her mature style. Bachem's early naïve tempera miniatures gradually evolved into larger paintings of a surreal dream world, filled with dark humor, satirical eroticism, and esoteric iconography of alchemy and autobiography.

Bachem's Later Commercial Work

The remaining body of commercial work by Bele Bachem deserves an in-depth analysis, as she continued to produce work on an ambitious scale with exceeding versatility for the rest of her career. However, the large scope of her contributions to film, television, book illustration, and graphic design does not lend itself to a thesis-length discussion. Therefore I will provide a short overview of the highlights from her prolific career in commercial art, in order to further illustrate the ubiquity and popularity of Bachem's idiosyncratic style in postwar West Germany, focusing on her diverse portfolio of book illustrations.

Beginning in 1940, with twenty simple illustrations in pen and ink for Peter Sher's book *Drollige Käuze (Droll Codgers)*, Bachem contributed cover designs and illustrations for nearly one hundred books and publications throughout her career. After the end of the war, she published cartoons in various satirical magazines such as *Der Simpl.* With the subheading, "Kunst–Karikatur–Kritik" (Art–Caricature–Critique), the magazine upheld the anti-fascist, anti-militarist, anti-bourgeois, and political and religious criticism of the turn-of-the-century publication *Simplicissimus*, which had collapsed under the censorship of the Third Reich.⁹⁵

⁹⁵ *Simplicissimus* was founded in 1896 in the Schwabing district of Munich by writer Thomas Theodor Heine as a magazine of art and literary criticism. With legendary contributions by Alfred Kubin, Fanny zu Reventlow,

Boasting contributions from famous artists of the *Neue Sachlichkeit*, including Otto Dix and Rudolf Schlichter, *Der Simpl* published its first issue in 1946.⁹⁶ Bachem's first contribution to the magazine came in 1949, with the cartoon line drawing titled, *Gastmahl (Banquet)* (Fig. 24). Featuring a party of fantastical diners, from a bearded lady to a wine-drinking bull, the satirical cartoon is a visual metaphor for male consumption of female sexuality, and interprets it literally, as the main course appears to consist of a young woman reclining on a large silver platter. Free from the Nazi censors and the politically-correct concerns of commercial firms like Rosenthal, Bachem's cartoon merges fantasy with erotic satire, a thematic combination that figures heavily in her later independent work.



Fig. 24 Bele Bachem, *Gastmahl (Banquet)*, published in *Der Simpl*, 4.1949, Nr. 13, P. 149. Covering a wide variety of genres, Bachem's illustrations further demonstrate her

versatility, as she expressively illustrates both the mundane and the fantastic with equal skill and

Hermann Hesse, George Grosz, and Thomas Mann, the publication often criticized the morality of the middle class and the corrupt government of the Weimar Republic. However, with the rise of the National Socialists in 1933, the magazine rapidly declined and published its last issue in 1935. Hans Zimmermann, "Über die Zeitschrift," (Simplicissimus Projekt, April 2012) <http://www.simplicissimus.info/index.php?id=9> (Accessed March 26, 2013).

⁹⁶ Ibid.

enthusiasm. Her whimsical illustrations throughout the fifties and sixties possessed the same playful appeal as her designs for Rosenthal, and improved the marketability and value of otherwise mundane publications in order to “be more than a book that one puts away after reading.”⁹⁷ The simplistic drawings and economical designs of her early illustrations “visualized with a play of fine lines the key scenes of the action complementing individual depictions through restrained coloration.”⁹⁸ Seen in her 1954 cover for *Die Strasse der Mode* (*The Street of Fashion*) (Fig. 25), Bachem cleverly merges the face of a young woman, with the bust of a wire mannequin, expressing the fifties aesthetic of fashion and femininity with an “eye-catching” design.

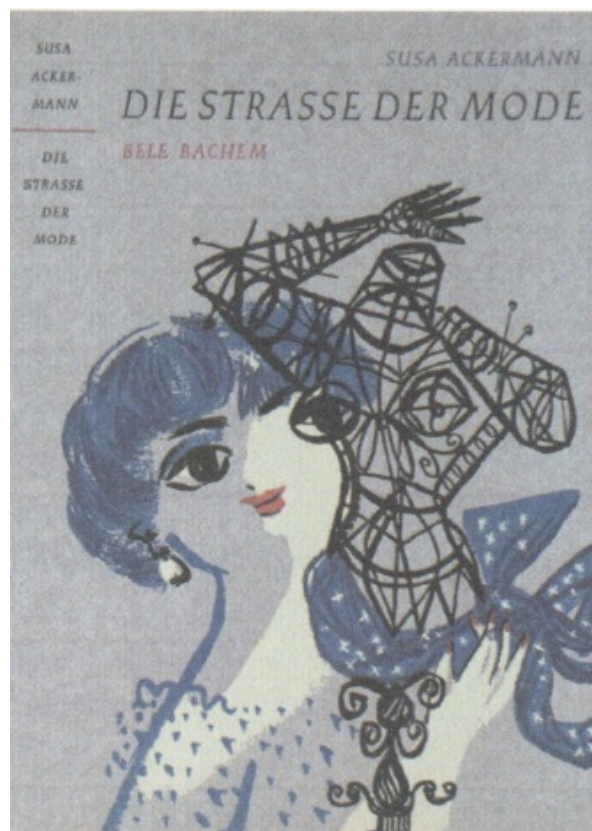


Fig. 25 Bele Bachem, Cover Illustration for Susa Ackermann's *Die Strasse der Mode*, 1954.

⁹⁷ “mehr sein als ein Buch, das man nach dem Lesen welegt.” Dorothee Bores, “‘Allem Suchen danach war ich enthoben’: die Buchumschläge von Bele Bachem.” *Imprimature: ein Jahrbuch für Bücherfreunde* (2003): 68.

⁹⁸ “visualisierte mit feinem Linienspiel die Schlüsselszenen der Handlung, ergänzte einzelne Zeichnungen durch eine zurückhaltende Koloration.” *Ibid.* 63.

In the sixties, Bachem's illustrations adapted again to the popular aesthetic trends, becoming more detailed and colorful. Bachem's portrayal of women in illustrations throughout the sixties communicate ideal beauty of youth through the mannerist elongation of the female body. Her cover illustration for Peter Paal's 1967 book *Die Frau von der ich Träume* (*The Woman of Whom I Dream*) (Fig. 26) portrays a "swan-necked beauty" wearing a colorful pyramidal crown of flowers atop her head, seductively gazing through dreamy, almond-shaped eyes with a smile of self-satisfaction. The design successful conveys a combination of sensuality and sophistication in visualizing a dream woman in brilliant color and romantic line.



Fig. 26 Bele Bachem, Illustration for Peter Paal's *Die Frau von der ich Träume*, 1967.

In other works, such as the cover of Günther Schwenn's 1964 book *Zwischen sämtlichen Musen* (*Between All Muses*) (Fig. 27), Bachem contrasts the "mannerist" sveltness of the young female by humorously exaggerating the squat plumpness of the middle-aged woman whose attire is overly ostentatious. Using caricature, Bachem playfully juxtaposes the beauty with the bawd.



Fig. 27 Bele Bachem, Cover Illustration for Günther Schwenn's *Zwischen sämtlichen Musen*, 1964.

Bele Bachem also wrote and illustrated seven books, beginning with the 1959 *Magisches Taschentuch* (*Magical Handkerchief*), a colorfully illustrated fictionalized history of the

handkerchief, which traces its origins back to ancient Egypt, even including the Biblical story of the Annunciation. Later publications are decidedly more surreal in both plot and image, merging reality with dreams, earning Bachem the designation of “probably Germany’s only female literary surrealist.”⁹⁹ In books such as the 1960 publication *Ausverkauf im Wind* (*Selling Out in the Wind*) and the 1982 book *Adele lebt unstet* (*Adele Lives Erratically*), Bachem chooses female protagonists for her stories that often slide back into the author’s childhood and personal experiences “of an ugly and inferior girl dominated by a menacing menagerie of adult people.” In the illustration titled *Garten der Angst* (*Garden of Fear*) from *Ausverkauf im Wind* (Fig. 28), the young female protagonist is accompanied by a father figure who is characterized as a combination of a clown and a magician, no doubt inspired by the personality of Bele’s father.¹⁰⁰ The cracked fountain topped by an arm-shaped water spout surrounded by spiraling serpents, appears in the foreground as a threatening presence in a confusing landscape whose perspectival rendering shifts throughout the picture plane. According to the text, the terrace that emerges in the background is the little girl’s “only friend,” while the tower’s “small, nasty window holes [...] were like many eyes [...] writhing, whimpering in their pointy, snarling bared mouths that sucked in the wind and suddenly biting down in order for it to spit it into the dark room.”¹⁰¹ The subsequent illustrations of the book correspond to the narrative’s descent into full surrealism, seen in the drawing, *Hinter geschlossenen Gardinen bleiben* (*Remaining Behind Closed Curtains*) (Fig. 29), in which Bachem elongates the limbs of the two figures and places them in a floating, narrow room with an exaggerated perspective. The female figure, covered in vines and

⁹⁹ “Deutschlands wahrscheinlich einziger literarisch Surrealistin.” Olaf N. Schwanke, “Ich neige so zum Düstern: Ein längst fälliger Essay zu Deutschlands wahrscheinlich einziger literarischer Surrealistin,” *Kritische Ausgabe*, 2007, <http://www.kritische-ausgabe.de/hefte/frauen/fracshwanke.pdf> (accessed February 27, 2013).

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ “die kleinen, bösen Fensterlöcher...wie viele Augen (waren) ...spitze, fletschende, Mäuler, die den Wind ein sogen, plötzlich zu bissen, daß er sich winselnd in ihnen wand, um ihn den dunklen Raum zu spucken.” Bele Bachem, *Ausverkauf im Wind: Geschichten und Zeichnungen* (Cologne and Berlin: Keiper, 1960), 12.

with a twisting snake between her legs, spouts water from her feet and floats between the exposed room and the surrounding watery landscape, which features a winged sphinx. Free from the restrictions of authors or publishers, Bachem asserts her surrealistic perspective as both an artist and a writer, incorporating events from her troubled childhood and transforming them into a narrative of dark fantasies.



Fig. 28 Bele Bachem, *Garten der Angst* (*Garden of Fear*) from *Ausverkauf im Wind*, 1960.

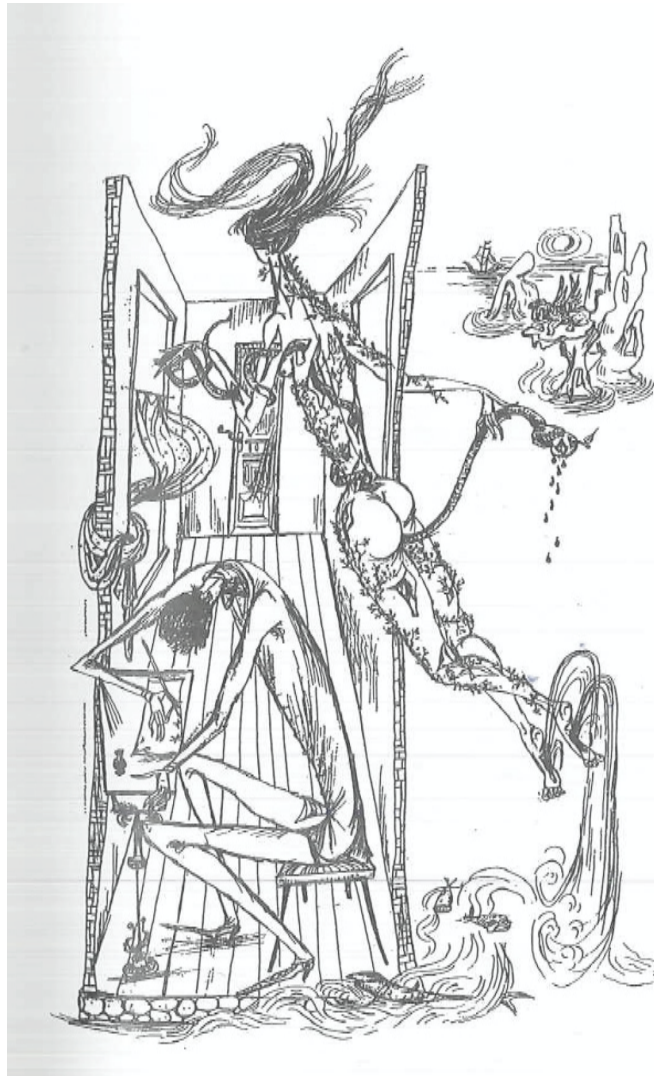


Fig. 29 Bele Bachem, *Hinter geschlossenen Gardinen bleiben* (*Remaining Behind Closed Curtains*), from *Ausverkauf im Wind*, 1960.

In addition to book illustrations, Bele Bachem also created the title sequences for four separate films, including *Das Wirthaus im Spessart* (*The Haunted Castle*) from 1958 and *Die Halbzarte* (*The Half Tender One*) in 1958. Both of these movies typified the kitsch of popular cinema in the fifties with saccharine, unrealistic plots. Bachem's title drawings function similarly with the whimsical animation of the cartoon characters, which are executed in the playful expressive style that typified the artist's work in all mediums during the fifties and sixties.

Bachem also designed posters for about ten other films, and was hired as an art director, costume designer, production designer, and set decorator for various made-for-television movies. Bachem continued working for various theater and ballet productions in Munich, Cologne, Baden-Baden and Heidelberg, designing costumes, sets, and posters for productions such as *Donna Diana*, *La Finta Semplice*, and *Sklavin ihres Geliebten* until 1972. In 1952, she was awarded the *Plakatpreis Toulouse-Lautrec* for her poster designs.¹⁰²

From designing a line of fashion handkerchiefs, to the album cover art for songstress Lale Anderson, to painting lively designs on tile, cabinets, and public commissions for large paintings on glass, Bachem's style was not only versatile but gained mass appeal, becoming a staple of popular culture in West Germany. Though she sacrificed her independent artistic development for the financial security offered by commercial commissions, she capitalized on her ability to adapt to the stylistic demands of the postwar decorative aesthetic, which not only brought her continued success, but allowed her to gain international exposure. However, she would experience a mid-career crisis that would change the course of her career from commercial design to a return to painting.

¹⁰² Gärtner, *Bele Bachem: Werkverzeichnis 1936-1986*, 408.

CHAPTER 3: THE ARTIFICIAL PARADISES AND FANTASY PORTRAITS OF BELE BACHEM

Bachem's Mid-Career Transition to Fine Art

In 1954, Bachem, moved away from Munich to Offenbach near Frankfurt, accepting a teaching position at the *Offenbacher Werkkunstschule* (Offenbach School of Arts and Crafts), where she taught illustration until 1957.¹⁰³ At the age of forty-one, the artist experienced a mid-career crisis. According to Bachem, “the need to paint was more serious than others, [so] I turned my back on these tasks. The inner fever drove me to the life that was nailed in my soul, to constantly reshape [myself].”¹⁰⁴ After establishing herself professionally within the sphere of commercial and applied arts, Bachem feared she was wasting her talents on banal, decorative art. Consequently, she decided to move back to Munich and return to the legendary Schwabing bohemian art scene, where she could rededicate herself to painting. Abandoning the flatness of her pre-war “poetic miniatures,” along with the false optimism of the postwar commercial aesthetic, she ultimately arrived at the dark, surrealistic fantasy style that characterizes her mature work.

Though Bachem continued to contribute some designs to Rosenthal and occasionally accepted commissions for theater productions and book illustrations until 1972, the majority of her artistic output was autonomous. She participated in over ninety gallery exhibitions after 1957. Winning the *Schwabinger Kunstpreis* (Schwabing Art Prize) for painting in 1962, Bachem established herself once more in the national and international world of fine art, showing primarily in galleries throughout Germany, as well as in Paris and New York. With these

¹⁰³ Gärtner, *Bele Bachem: Werkverzeichnis 1935-1986*, 404.

¹⁰⁴ “[...] das Malenmüssen schwerer wiegt als anderes, kehrte ich diesen Aufgaben den Rücken. Das innere Fieber trieb mich, das Leben, welches mir in die Seele genagelt wurde, immer wieder neu zu gestalten.” Bachem, “Bele Bachem über sich selbst.”

successful gallery showings, she acquired the financial freedom to work and travel at her discretion.

Rüdiger Maria Kampmann's introduction to Bele Bachem's *Werkverzeichnis* titled, "Und Proserpina Freut Sich Doch" ("And Yet Proserpina Is Pleased") is the only critical source on Bachem's later paintings and drawings.¹⁰⁵ In the first lines of the introduction, Kampmann designates Bele Bachem as one of the five great female German painters of the twentieth century along with Paula Modersohn-Becker, Gabriele Münter, Käthe Kollwitz, and Ida Kerkovius. Of these female figureheads of German art, Kampmann identifies Bele Bachem's distinct perspective as a Munich bohemian, saying, "in her work and personal life there are still impressive hints of that Schwabing Bohemian, which has had many fascinating faces since [Fanny zu] Reventlow."¹⁰⁶ In the poetic prose of his introduction, Kampmann gives a somewhat comprehensive overview of Bachem's style and iconography, but offers only superficial analyses of specific works, by alluding to possible inspirations and influences, and quoting lines from the artist's books. Overall, the poetic metaphors and descriptive detail with which he describes Bachem suggests a deep admiration and understanding of her perplexing work, and his discussion provides a valuable starting point for more thorough analyses. I aim not only to provide wider accessibility to Bachem's paintings by translating passages from Kampmann into English, but also to expound further upon the sources of inspiration and underlying themes in Bachem's work, first identified by Kampmann. In this chapter, I will provide a contextual and conceptual framework within which to analyze and interpret Bachem's narrative fantasy

¹⁰⁵ Kampmann also contributed to publications on the English illustrator Aubrey Beardsley, as well as the German psychedelic artist Helmut Wenske.

¹⁰⁶ "In ihrem Werk und in ihrer Person lebt eindrucksvoll noch etwas jener Schwabinger Bohème, die seit der Reventlow so viele fesselnde Gesichter gehabt hat." Rüdiger Maria Kampmann, "Und Proserpina Freut Sich Doch: Ein Essay zum 70. Geburtstag der Malerin Bele Bachem," in *Bele Bachem: Werkverzeichnis 1935-1986*, by Ulrike Camilla Gärtner (Munich: Verlag Galerie Wolfgang Ketterer, 1986), III.

paintings after 1955. I will identify the various sources of inspiration, both artistic and biographical, that inform the style, iconography, and content of her paintings in an attempt to provide a way in which the viewer can read and interpret the enigmatic paintings of Bele Bachem.

The Bohemian Milieu of Schwabing

Schwabing is a borough in the northern district of the Bavarian capital city Munich, which is famously known as “Munich’s most beautiful daughter” and “Germany’s Montmartre.”¹⁰⁹ In an excerpt from a 1951 issue of *Travel Digest* on Munich-Schwabing, Bele Bachem is quoted as saying, “I need the company of crazy people, and I find them in Schwabing.”¹¹⁰ Inspired in part by the artistic environment of the bohemian artist’s district of Schwabing, Bachem experienced a profound stylistic transition after her return to her former home.

During World War II, Munich became Hitler’s “Capital of the Movement” and according to the Munich historian Ludwig Hollweck, Munich’s artists were forced to cooperate with the Nazis and “bow under the terror of the Thousand Year Reich and the orders of the art dictators in their uniforms and boots.”¹¹¹ After experiencing the artistic oppression of the two World Wars, the Schwabing district struggled to regain its position as the flourishing center of German bohemia due to the limited housing, extensive war damage, and non-existent funding for the arts. It was only through the efforts of private collectors, galleries, and the three largest postwar artist groups, *Münchner Secession*, *Neue Gruppe*, and the *Münchner Künstlergenossenschaft*, that the Munich art market was revived in the mid-fifties. Munich held one of the first and largest

¹⁰⁹ Peter Watson, *The German Genius: Europe’s Third Renaissance, the Second Scientific Revolution, and the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harper Collins, 2011), 503.

¹¹⁰ “Munich-Schwabing.” *Travel Digest*, 1951, 49.

¹¹¹ Ludwig Hollweck, *Unser München: München im 20. Jahrhundert. Erinnerungen und Berichte, Bilder und Dokumente von 1900 bis heute* (Munich: Süddeutscher Verlag, 1967), 307.

postwar exhibitions of German contemporary art since *Entartete Kunst*, where art that was previously persecuted and banned was celebrated and displayed. Schwabing's former legacy attracted a new postwar generation of intellectuals and artists, and as a result, the area experienced a resurgence of cultural production in the sixties. Though the Munich art scene was dominated by conceptually driven contemporary movements such as *Gruppe SPUR*, the bohemian spirit of German creativity that characterized the turn of the century, ultimately triumphed over the conservative aesthetic dictatorship of the Nazis. The cultural renewal of Munich coincided with Bele Bachem's to her home, which she characterized as the "city of dreams" with reference to the rich cultural history of the Schwabing district in the early twentieth century.¹¹²

In varying periods of intensity throughout the twentieth century the bohemian quarter of Schwabing was a hub of artistic production—witnessing the rise of *Jugendstil* and *Blaue Reiter* Expressionism—and was home to scores of artists, writers and political figures such as Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Vladimir Lenin, and Thomas Mann. The pre-war bohemian milieu of "the rather odd, quite eccentric and self-assured Schwabing" was described by Kandinsky as a place in which one "immediately stood out if they were without a palette, or a canvas, or at least without a portfolio," and "you could find at least two ateliers under the roof of every house, where sometimes not exactly very much was painted but a lot was always debated, disputed, philosophized and conscientiously drunk."¹¹³ The term "Schwabing Bohemian" did not just signify a lifestyle, but a state of being and a collective identity that aspired to directly oppose bourgeois ideals. Fanny zu Reventlow, the "Countess of Schwabing Bohemia," typified the character of the Schwabing Bohemian, as she rebelled against her bourgeois background and

¹¹² Bettina Böhmer.

¹¹³ Ashley Bassie, *Expressionism* (New York: Parkstone International, 2008), 32.

moved to Munich to become a painter and a writer. Yet she was infamously known for her indulgent lifestyle spent in cafes, at costume parties, and in the beds of fellow Schwabing bohemians, essentially making her living as a socialite and eventually as a prostitute.¹¹⁴ Members of the Schwabing art scene espoused anti-bourgeois, progressive ideas, but with an “essentially aristocratic contempt for everything petty, philistine, and ordinary.” Though many bohemians, especially artists, portrayed themselves to society as downtrodden romantics who valued art over social status, they ultimately became bourgeois-bohemians themselves.¹¹⁵ In order to understand this oxymoronic term, one must look to the French origins of bohemia.

The term “bohemian” was first used in 1830s France to describe an emerging cultural subgroup of young artists and intellectuals who deliberately defied the norms of society. This class of like-minded individualists, “driven by an unstinting sense of calling, enter[ed] into art with no other means of existence than art itself.” The term was derived from the French term for gypsy, *bohémien*, as the two groups shared a similar identity living a marginalized existence that defied the sensibilities of the rising popular class of the bourgeoisie. According to an 1840 account by a French stage figure,

I understand that a class of individuals whose existence is a problem, social condition a myth, fortune an enigma, who have no stable residence, no recognized retreat, who are located nowhere and whom one encounters everywhere! Who has no single occupation and who exercised fifty professions; of whom most get up in the morning without knowing where they will dine in the evening; rich today, famished tomorrow, ready to live honestly if they can and some other way if they can't.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ Martin Green, “The Mountain of Truth,” in *Revolutionary Romanticism: A Drunken Boat Anthology*, edited by Max Blechman (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1999), 174-176.

¹¹⁵ “[...] ihrem Wesen nach aristokratische Geringschätzung alles philiströs und kleinlich Ordentlichen.” Kampmann, “Und Proserpina Freut Sich Doch,” III.

¹¹⁶ Unidentified French stage figure quoted in Jerrold Seigel, *Bohemian Paris: Culture, Politics, and the Boundaries of Bourgeois Life, 1830-1930* (New York: Penguin Group, 1986), 4.

The romanticized lifestyle of the bohemian upheld freedom, truth, and beauty of life as a form of art over the constraining social conditions of French society. Spending much of their time in cafes and in the streets, the bohemians were wanderers and vagabonds of the city, populating the cabarets with the *demi monde* hedonists of the night. However, the popular sentiment of “scratch a bohemian, find a bourgeois,” alludes to the fact that the lifestyles of many so-called bohemians mirrored the same status-driven pursuits of the bourgeoisie. Artists such as Pablo Picasso illustrate this ironic fusion of two opposing identities when he found success as an artist in his later career, painting like a bohemian in his studio by day and dining in fine restaurants with the bourgeoisie by night.¹¹⁷



Fig. 30 Pablo Picasso, *Family of Saltimbanques*, 1905, oil on canvas, 212.8 cm × 229.6 cm, Chester Dale Collection, National Gallery of Art.

Bohemian artists personally identified with the outcasts of society, and their artwork often portrayed gypsies, street performers, and circus people. Pablo Picasso, one of the foremost bohemian artists of the twentieth century, was inspired by circus performers during his Rose

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 5.

Period from 1905 to 1906, even painting portraits of himself as the character of the lone harlequin. In his *Family of Saltimbanques* from 1905 (Fig. 30) he depicts a cast of circus characters occupying a large, expansive, desert-like landscape, symbolizing the marginalization of the bohemian's status under the dominant force of the bourgeoisie. Much of Bele Bachem's oeuvre alludes to a similar influence and unconventional self-identification, as the milieu of the Schwabing art district where she spent the majority of her life was distinctly bohemian. Circus people, gypsies, fortunetellers, and vagabonds figure heavily in the iconography of her paintings and drawings, and even convey a similar use of landscape as Picasso's Rose Period. As seen in the 1948 work *Peters Tod* (*Peter's Death*) (Fig. 31), Bachem uses the figure of the harlequin to represent the tragic character of the artist. In this transitional work, she maintains the naïve style of her early "poetic miniatures" with her use of cool pastel tempera tones. Like many of her paintings, *Peters Tod* was inspired by a real event, in which a close friend and actor named Peter repeatedly attempted suicide—failing each time—but paradoxically died of natural causes later that year. The inherent irony of the tale suggests a degree of elaboration—a humorous punch line to assuage the depressive postwar psyche—and is translated and transformed into the magical realism of her paintings. The depressed actor becomes a harlequin who is mourned by a fantastical funeral procession of ballerinas and bohemians, including the influential figure of Bachem's friend, the surrealist Fabius von Gugel, who is seen with arms outstretched approaching the dead harlequin from the right. The playful morbidity of *Peters Tod* represents Bachem's transition from the vital and lush settings of her compact "poetic miniatures" to the panoramic mountains of her later dreamscapes. In many of her late paintings, the figure of the tragic harlequin is used as a metaphor for the identity of the bohemian artist. Images of circus people, gypsies, and eccentric intellectuals figure heavily in Bachem's late paintings. Their

presence alludes to the bohemian environment in which the artist found herself, while their symbolism confers a bohemian identity upon the artist.



Fig. 31 Bele Bachem, *Peters Tod* (Peter's Death), ca. 1948, tempera, 34 cm x 44 cm.

The Artistic Models of Bachem's Paintings

On the topic of her artistic influences, Bachem expressed a humble, almost self-effacing admiration of the master artists of history. In an excerpt from her autobiographical essay she confesses, "I find it hard to understand why a person, rather than making an easy life, paints, because above every painter, the history of art, with Tintoretto, El Greco, and the giant Michelangelo floats unattainably high. All world calamities anticipate Goya. How should we reach the quiet harmony of Vermeer or Botticelli, Degas' rigor?"¹²¹ In a 1983 unaired interview, Bachem lists her favorite artists, ranging from pre-Renaissance to modern day, with Cimabue,

¹²¹ "Es ist, finde ich, kaum verständlich, daß ein Mensch, statt sich das Leben leicht zu machen, malt, denn über jedem Maler schwebt, unerreichbar hoch, die Kunstgeschichte mit Tintoretto, Greco, dem Riesen Michelangelo. Alle Weltuntergänge nahm Goya vorweg. Wie sollte man die stille Harmonie Vermeers erreichen oder Boticellis, Degas Strenge?" Bachem, "Bele Bachem über sich selbst."

Hieronymus Bosch, Johannes Vermeer, Alessandro Magnasco, Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, El Greco, Marc Chagall, Salvador Dali, and Pablo Picasso, and speaks of her affinity for Indian miniature painting, Dutch still-life painting, and the Viennese School of Fantastic Realism.¹²² However she does not identify these as specific sources of inspiration but as models of great painting, which she could never emulate. Instead, she asserted that she was truly inspired by life experiences, world travels, and the faces of the people she met. Despite her denial of direct inspiration from specific pictorial sources, the stylistic, iconographic, and thematic qualities of her paintings were heavily influenced by Flemish painting of the early sixteenth century, Surrealism, and the Vienna School of Fantastic Realism.

At this time of transition, Bachem also experimented with different mediums, mixing various combinations of egg tempera until she eventually developed her own formula for the painting medium casein. The dimensional quality, subdued tonalities, and quick-drying properties of casein served the need for spontaneous expression in Bachem's mature style, becoming her medium of choice over tempera after 1956. Though she occasionally used oil, most of Bachem's later works are executed in casein, and demonstrate her superior technical handling of the medium.¹²⁵

Bachem's expansive landscapes feature peculiar rock formations that betray the influence of sixteenth-century Netherlandish painting and the "Flemish Primitives" on her later work. For example, the apocalyptic atmosphere, supernatural mountainscape, and symbolic iconography of Bachem's 1958 *Verlobte vor vereister Kulisse* (*Fiancées Before an Icy Backdrop*) (Fig. 32) make

¹²² Bele Bachem, Unaired interview footage, Tape recording, Munich, 1983.

¹²⁵ Casein is a water-soluble medium derived from a milk-based protein that was used primarily for industrial and commercial use in the nineteenth-century. In the twentieth century, it was sold in tubes, and utilized in fine art painting as an alternative to traditional tempera. It is fast-drying, and produces a matte, or semi-matte effect. Bele Bachem recalls her first experiments with the medium in which the paint flaked off easily when dry, due to its thick, adhesive properties. Ward, Gerald W. R. *The Grove Encyclopedia of Materials and Techniques in Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 90.

reference to the work of Joachim Patinir and Hieronymous Bosch, both of whom Bachem admired.¹²⁶ Patinir's *Landscape with Saint Jerome* (Fig. 33) is evoked with Bachem's jagged ice formations seen in the background as well as the dramatic blue and green sky. In the foreground, a cracked fountain with bulbous, organic spouts that taper into delicate plantlike stems recalls the similar bizarre vegetal fountains seen in the panels of Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*.

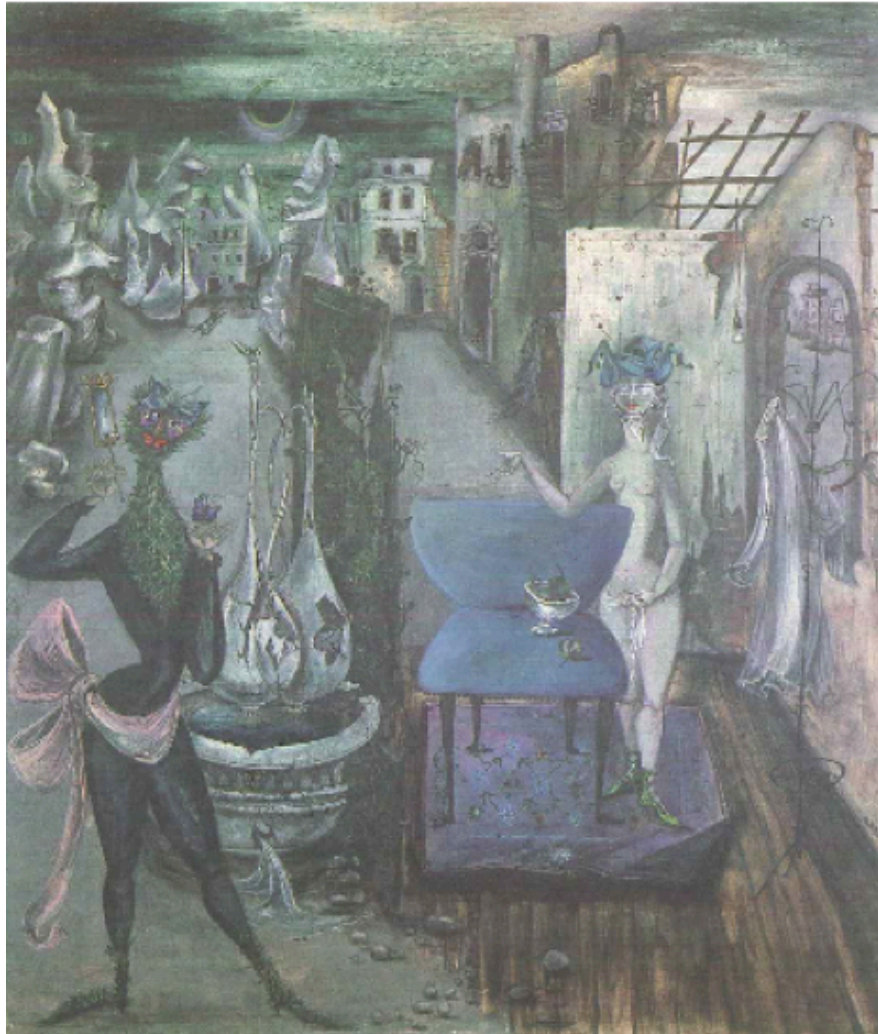


Fig. 32 Bele Bachem, *Verlobte vor vereister Kulisse* (*Fiancées Before an Icy Backdrop*), 1958, casein, 70 cm x 60 cm.

¹²⁶ Bettina Böhmer.



Fig. 33 Joachim Patinir, *Landscape with St. Jerome*, ca. 1515, oil on panel, 74 x 91 cm, Prado Museum.

References to Bosch are pervasive throughout Bachem's iconography, and their symbolic interpretation is similarly elusive. Bachem frequently includes explicit allusions to the fantastical bestiary of Bosch with animals and chimerical creatures such as owls, butterflies, unicorns, humans with the heads of birds and fish, cats and dogs with the human faces, and unidentifiable menacing, four-legged creatures. Snakes are a major motif throughout Bachem's works, appearing as a sinister presence wrapped around the necks of her voluptuous half-nude females. In a 1988 interview for the magazine *Architektur und Wohnen*, Bachem explained her fascination with snakes, which began with a traumatic childhood incident in when her father forced her to overcome her fear by throwing her into a pile of grass snakes. The symbol of the snake became an amulet against evil for Bachem, as she wore a variety of snake rings and even aspired to write a book about the phenomenology of the snake.¹²⁷ In the words of Kampmann, "Before our artist

¹²⁷ Heiner Uber, "Im Zeichnen der Schlange" *Architektur und Wohnen*, April/May 1988, 78-80.

has anyone called attention to the erotic suggestiveness of snakes and their unbridled passion? Snakes dangle on many images and hiss aphrodisiac incantation that paralyzes the will [...]

Bachem would be the last to be afraid of them. These vipers, which slide through the body, are the harbingers of occult messages she received in her sleep, and ultimately comforting certainties, as they were known to the Orphics.”¹²⁸ In images of women, such as *Kammerjägerin in der Nacht der Füchse* (*Chamber Huntress in the Night of the Foxes*) (Fig. 34), butterflies, moths, and a snake with a fox head accompany the sensual body of the powerful hunter who assumes the role of a *femme fatale*. The presence of these symbols seems to confer magical powers and accentuates the erotic body and powerful character of the woman, who looks indifferently at the viewer, inviting an erotic gaze. Incorporating the influence of Flemish painters such as Bosch and Patinir, Bachem similarly employs a charged iconography of animal symbols that enhance the mystical nature of her paintings.

Influence of Surrealism

In her own words, Bachem asserted her individual artistic identity:

The painter is a seer, experiencing differently than others, he sees the world only in vision. They count me among the Surrealists, but I'm a portraitist. Painting portraits for me is to try to capture the background of that which is to be represented [...] Always an attempt to make something visible that one does not know himself.¹²⁹

¹²⁸ “Hat vor unserer Künstlerin schon einmal jemand auf die erotischen Anzüglichkeiten der Schlangen und ihre zügellose Leidenschaftlichkeit aufmerksam gemacht? Schlangen züngeln auf vielen Bildern und zischen aphrodisische Beschwörung, die den Willen lähmt [...] Bachem wäre die letzte, sich vor ihnen zu fürchten. Diese Vipern, die durch den Körper hindurchgleiten, sind Überbringer okkulten Botschaften, die wir im Schlaf empfangen, und letztendlich tröstlicher Gewißeheiten, wie sie den Orphikern bekannt waren.” Werkverzeichnis. Kampmann, “Und Prosperpina Freut Sich Doch,” V.

¹²⁹ “Der Maler ist ein Seher, anders als andere erlebt, erkennt er die Welt einzig im Sehen. Man zählt mich zu den Surrealisten, doch ich bin Portraitistin. Portraitieren heißt für mich zu versuchen, den Hintergrund der Darzustellenden zu erfassen [...] Stets ein Versuch, etwas sichtbar zu machen, was man selber nicht weiß.” Bachem, “Bele Bachem über sich selbst.”

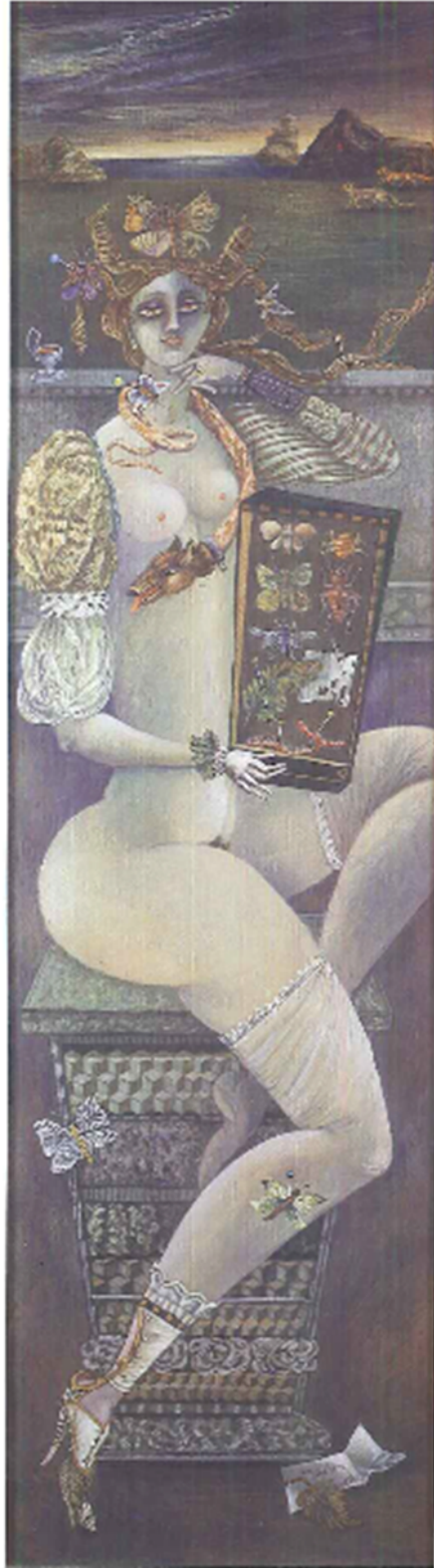


Fig. 34 Bele Bachem, *Kammerjägerin in der Nacht der Füchse* (*Chamber Huntress in the Night of the Foxes*), 1980, casein, 124 x 36 cm.

Throughout her entire career, Bachem refused classification though many sources refer to her as a surrealist or fantastic realist. Though she repeatedly denied any surrealist affinities, Bele Bachem's description of her artistic process, as well as the overall style and content of her paintings produced after 1955, compels comparison with female surrealists of the mid-twentieth century. She was even referred to as "Munich's equivalent to Léonor Fini."¹³⁰ Artists like Frida Kahlo, Dorothea Tanning, and Leonora Carrington, who often shunned their categorization as surrealists, exemplified a shared "predilection of women artists for an art in which a personal narrative, however fantastic, dominates," a preference which Bachem similarly demonstrates.¹³¹ For these female artists, Surrealism validated and legitimized the expression of personal reality through the exploration of dreams and the unconscious, but unlike their more famous male colleagues in Surrealism, "they did not need manifestoes or collective games to legitimize their search."¹³² Rather than focusing on states of "hallucinatory disjunction" explored through the paranoiac critical methods of male surrealists like Salvador Dalí, the female styles of surrealism center on autobiography and the female experience. More comparable to the art of Edvard Munch and Egon Schiele, "the self-referential nature" of the work of female surrealists seeks to translate the singular experience of emotional trauma, erotic desire, or personal introspection into the fodder for a visual narrative of self-revelation.¹³³ Much like the female surrealists, Bele Bachem visualized her autobiography as a pictorial narrative, combining memories and dreams with pure fantasy.

The compositional complexity and symbolic intensity of Bele Bachem's later paintings, not only demonstrate her transition to a mature style, but also convey the confidence of an artist

¹³⁰ "Bele Bachem," *Arts Magazine*, Vol. 54, 1966, 52.

¹³¹ Whitney Chadwick, *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1985), 219.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 236.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 221.

who was acutely aware of her artistic identity and was compelled to express it. In an interview with the artist in her studio appearing in her 1986 television episode of *Frauengeschichten*, she offered rare insight into her artistic process, a topic she often avoided, as she was “never in the mood to truly elaborate.”¹³⁴ She claimed that the inspiration for her paintings was a combination of inner experiences—something she saw, a conversation, a dream, or even just a feeling of *Misshelligkeit*.¹³⁵ Utilizing her art as a form of psychological catharsis, she then filtered these autobiographical episodes through a lens of magical surrealism and transmuted these events into a personal iconography of symbols. She revealed that she depicted the concept of *Misshelligkeit* as a lone wolf, a metaphor for the “inner wolf” that emerges during bouts of depression, the feeling of isolation and the uncontrollable animalism of inner emotionality. She then transferred these symbols into a landscape, where multiple states of consciousness—dreams, memories, reality—merge onto a single fantastic plane, expressing the enigmatic singularity of human experience.

As seen in paintings such as *Der Rote Teppich (The Red Carpet)* (Fig. 35) from 1959, Bachem depicts an inner state of emotional tension that typified the relationship with her father. Using confusing interior space with conflicting perspectives that divide the composition into two separate planes, she conveys a physical division between the female in the foreground and the menacing male figure in the background. She utilizes a rose-colored curtain—a compositional device used by Dutch painters such as Vermeer—to set off the seated woman at the table from the rest of the room, visually and conceptually isolating her foregrounded “reality” from the figures occupying the “dream” of the background. The flatness of the red rug creates an up-tilting perspective, which is contradicted by the diagonally receding lines of the right side of the

¹³⁴ *Frauengeschichten: Beate Bachem.*

¹³⁵ *Misshelligkeit* translates as an unexpected feeling of disharmony, unease, or inner discord.

room. With the deep recessions into dark foyers and dimly lit backrooms, the condensed rendering and exaggeration of depth amplify the irrationality of the space, which represents the tumultuous environment of her childhood home.

The bare-breasted female figure in the foreground is a self-portrait of the artist, who looks wistful as she holds a long braid of her own hair that she has just cut with scissors—an allusion to the castration of her femininity. On the table before her, an astrological chart, unbalanced scale, and cup with dice appear as a symbolic still life of occult objects, suggesting that a magical ritual is about to take place. In the background, a figure in a red suit with a cane—another representation of her father—looks at the woman with disdain, as if he is discovering her in the midst of a forbidden act, or forcing her to perform it. Bachem's surrealistic treatment of space functions to create a feeling of tension and drama that enhance the emotional resonance of the scene to express the traumatic experiences of her childhood. Appearing like a scene from a dark fairytale, the painting casts Bachem in the role of a princess held captive by an evil magician who forces her to cut her hair. The self-portrait, as in the work of Frida Kahlo, was a primary subject for the female surrealists, as the female corporeal form becomes the medium with which the artist can manifest personal experience and inner states of consciousness. A similar theme of the castration of female identity seen in Bachem's *Der rote Teppich* (Fig. 35) is also found in Frida Kahlo's *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair* (Fig. 36) from 1940 (Fig. 36). Kahlo paints herself sitting in a chair, wearing an oversized man's suit and holds scissors in her hands. Surrounded by strands of her long, black hair she depicts the moment after she has shorn the majority of her hair, with an inscription at the top from a Mexican song that translates as, "Look, if I loved you it was because of your hair. Now that you are without hair, I don't love you anymore." Painted after her divorce from Diego Rivera, the portrait not only serves as a

representation of the artist's loss of her identity as a wife, but also serves to reassert Kahlo's autonomy from her unfaithful husband.¹³⁶

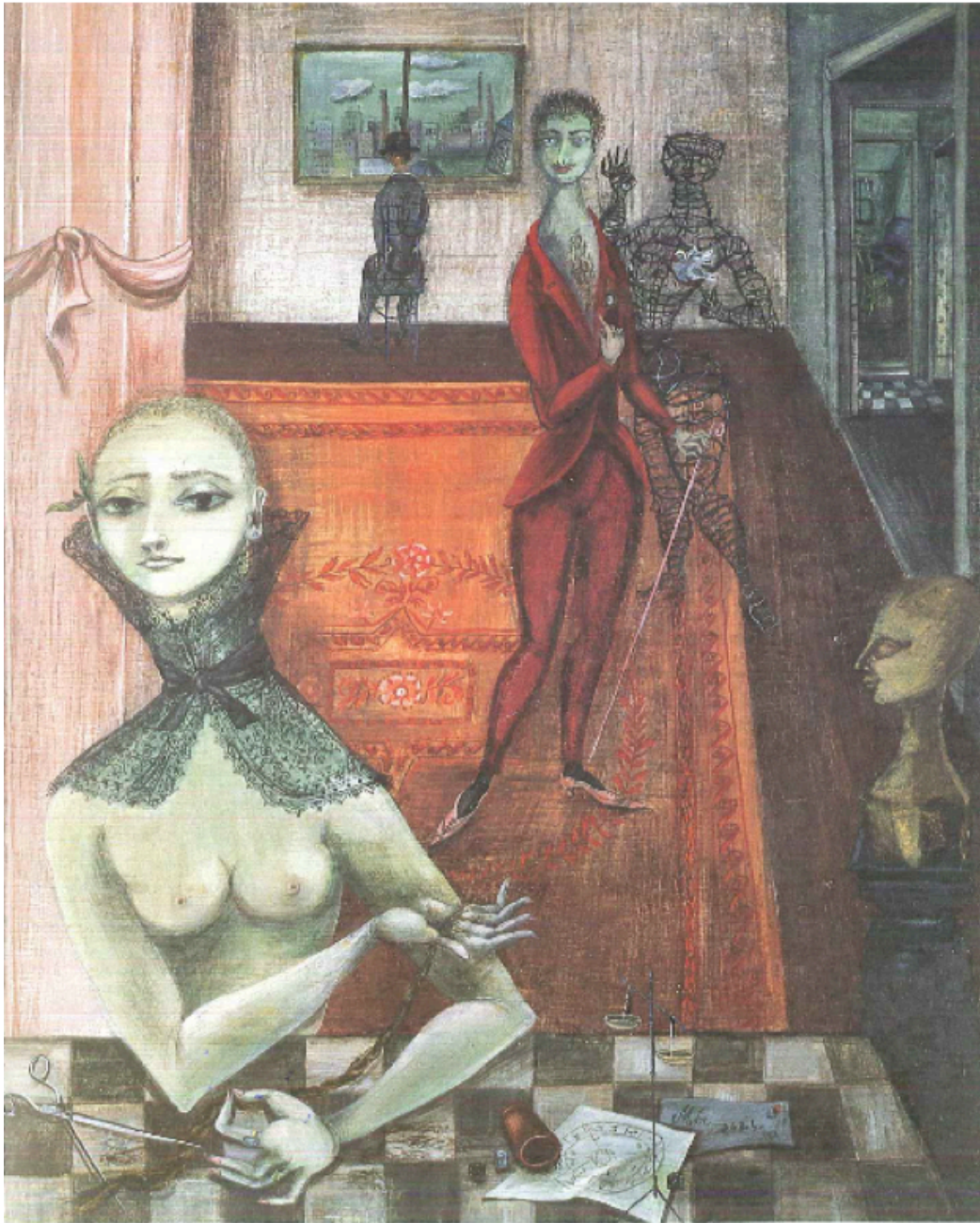


Fig. 35 Bele Bachem, *Der rote Teppich* (*The Red Carpet*), 1958, Egg tempera and casein.

¹³⁶ The Museum of Modern Art, *MoMA Highlights*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, revised 2004, originally published 1999, p. 181



Fig. 36 Frida Kahlo, *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair*, 1940, oil on canvas, 40 x 27.9 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY.

The feminine body, with its mysterious life-creating and life-sustaining powers, is also employed as a symbol of the hermetic source of female creative powers and a repository of esoteric knowledge. In Bele Bachem's 1976 *Porträt einer Wahrsagerin* (*Portrait of a Fortune Teller*) (Fig. 37), the full-figured body of a voluptuous woman is juxtaposed with esoteric objects of divination. She holds a gold medallion with astrological symbols in her left hand and points to a manuscript with enigmatic ciphers that rests on her lap. The fullness of her form and her exposed breasts contrast the macabre human-faced feline that sits complacently atop her bulging thigh. Becoming a metaphor for gender relations, the immensity of the female body emasculates that of the male who has become a house pet. Bachem repeatedly uses this disparity of scale

between male and female figures throughout her work, often representing the female body as a source of psychic power and occult wisdom.

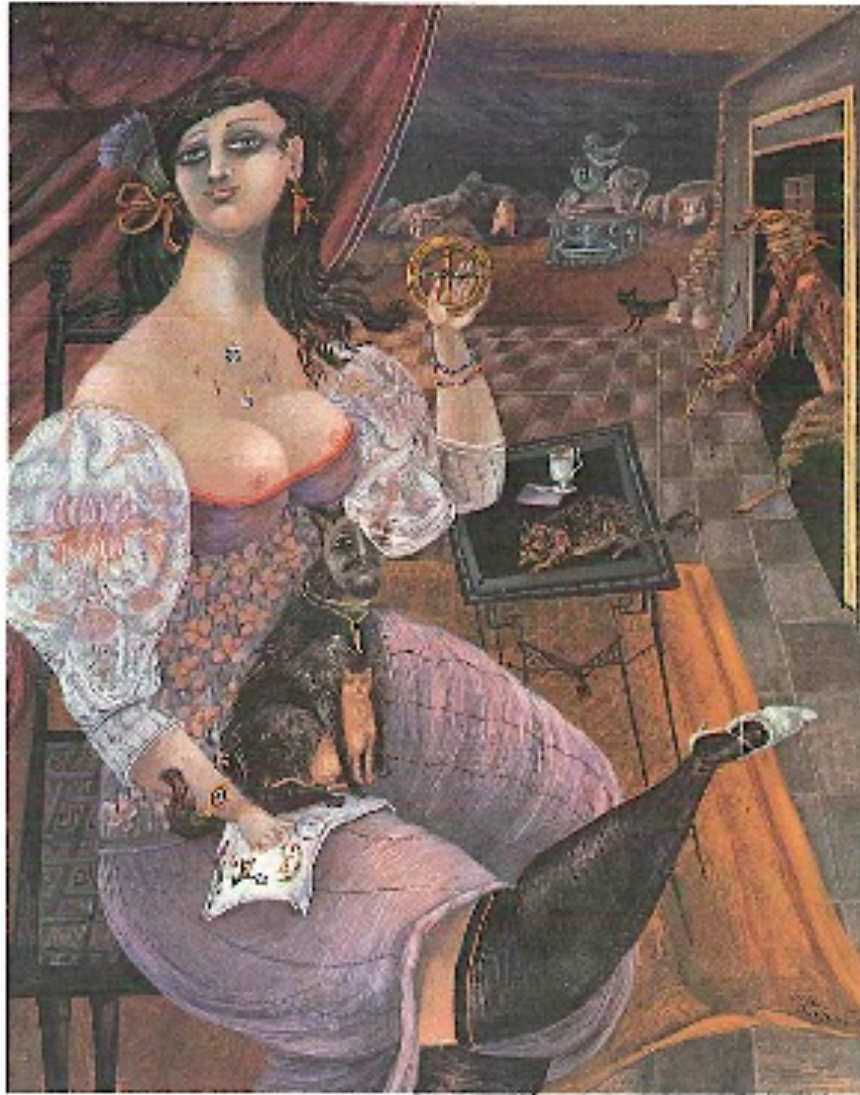


Fig. 37 Bele Bachem, *Porträt einer Wahrsagerin (Portrait of a Fortune Teller)*, 1976, Casein, 70 cm x 56 cm.

The fantastic, mythological, and occult sources of inspiration present in the work of Bele Bachem are comparable to the work of reluctant surrealist Leonora Carrington, who often combined Bosch-inspired alchemical symbols and fantasy creatures with self-portraiture in

compositions involving “rapid dislocations of space and scale.”¹³⁷ The similarities between Bachem and the female surrealists are compelling, but there is no evidence to suggest that they inspired her directly. Nevertheless, Bachem shares with them a similar disposition of self-exploration through fantastical narrative and the assertion of artistic autonomy, denying affiliation with male-dominated movements such as Surrealism.

In the majority of the mature paintings by Bele Bachem, the artist explores space and perspective as subjective entities that constantly shift and transform to express the ephemeral nature of the dream setting. Her use of exaggerated perspective and the blending of interior space with wide expanses of barren wastelands evokes the *pittura metafisica* of Giorgio de Chirico, and conveys a similar sense of false harmony and the transience of feelings. Artfully described by Kampmann, “[t]he brush of the painter seems to know yet another dimension; like Circe, who sets traps, she captures the viewer through magical perspectives constructed in all directions, constantly exchanging indoor and outdoor spaces, looking through windows from the outside in and the same inside out [...] they are all for our curiosity, entrances to an inner life, at the same time it trembles before and after burns to reveal itself to us.”¹³⁸ Expansive wastelands of desert and unusual rock formations figure largely in the surreal setting of Bachem’s mature compositions. Starkly contrasting with the lush landscapes of her 1942 tempera series *Tausendundein Nächte*, the desolate landscapes of her paintings often feature bombed-out buildings, leafless trees, and strange sculptures foregrounded by an ominous atmosphere of cloudy, sunless skies. These landscapes only appear in her work after 1948, becoming more

¹³⁷ Ibid., 200.

¹³⁸ Der Pinsel der Malerin scheint noch eine andere Dimension zu kennen. Wie eine Circe, die Fallen ausgelegt, täuscht und fängt sie den Betrachter durch Zauberperspektiven, die sie in alle Richtungen konstruiert, vor allem aber dadurch, daß sie drinnen zugleich draußen sein läßt...Sie alle sind für unsere Neugier Einsteige in ein Innenleben, das zugleich davor zittert und darauf brennt, sich uns zu enthüllen. Kampmann, "Und Prosperpina Freut Sich Doch," IV.

dominant in the compositions after 1958, and are a characteristic feature in her paintings and drawings from the seventies until her death. In a 1983 interview she referred to the period after World War II as “die Zeit des Steinebeissen” (The Time of Biting Stones) to describe the desolation and poverty of the collective postwar experience, which is visually manifested in her stony, barren landscapes, which “no longer rely on Poussin but the horrors of the twentieth century.”¹³⁹ In a few of her paintings, grey cobblestone streets leading to finger-like mountains in the distance are used to create a metaphysical landscape to literally express the “hard” times after the war.

Many of Bachem’s works explore the spaces of ambiguously rendered architecture, in which she distorts scale and blends outdoor public space with vignette depictions of private space. The fragmented apartment buildings seen in paintings such as *Das Spiel ist aus* (*The Game is Up*) (Fig. 37) show intricate façades of numerous windows and doors that reveal the private life of the inhabitants whose varying sizes defy the space which they occupy. Visually referencing the damaged state and scarcity of Munich apartment buildings after the war, where Bachem lived with her daughter, she depicts the “dwellings that do not protect [...] open to the calamity that lurks outside.”¹⁴⁰ The overly large figures seen in the windows evoke a sense of claustrophobia and vulnerability. Her dislocations of scale and space were inspired in part by the deplorable living conditions after the war, and the expansive desert-like environments that dominate her compositions evoke feelings of desolation and hopelessness that typified the damaged psyche of many Germans.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ “Die Behausungen schützen nicht [...] durchlässig für das Verhängnis, das draußen lauert.” Ibid.

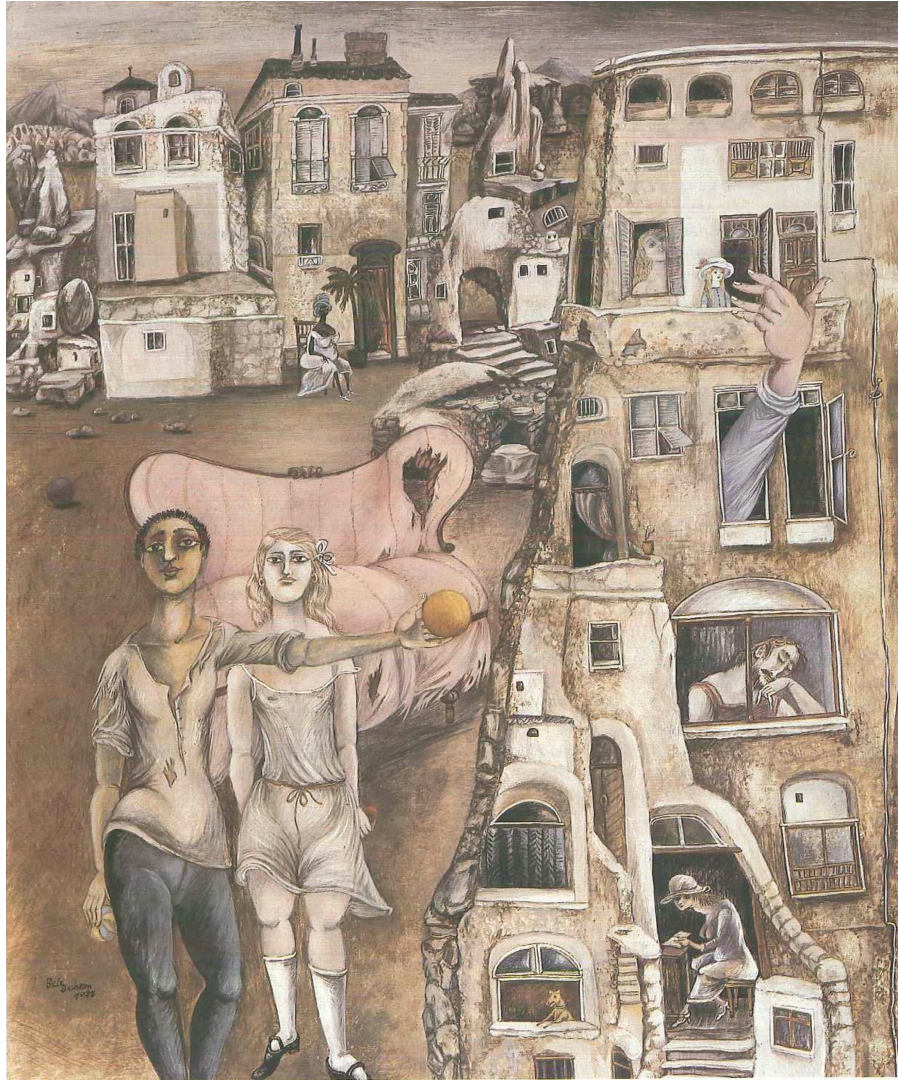


Fig. 38 Bele Bachem, *Das Spiel ist aus* (*The Game is Up*), 1977, Casein, 73.5 cm x 59.5 cm.

Influence of Fantastic Realism and Alchemical Themes

Ernst Fuchs, the founder of the Viennese School of Fantastical Realism, is portrayed in multiple paintings by Bele Bachem, appearing prominently in the 1964 works, *Alchemistenpaar* (*Alchemist Pair*) (Fig. 38) and *Porträt des Malers Ernst Fuchs mit Frau als Alchemistenpaar* (*Portrait of the Painter Ernst Fuchs with his Wife as an Alchemist Pair*) (Fig. 39). Though it is unclear whether or not Bachem and Fuchs actually met, Bachem's portrait of the artist and his wife does suggest a personal relationship. Regardless, Bachem was an admirer of Fuchs' work,

and many of the stylistic and conceptual influences of her later paintings parallel that of Fantastic Realism. In an interview with Fuchs, he describes the aims of Fantastic Realism or his preferred moniker, the “Phantasmogorics,” saying,

Our art reflects that which we call our interior world, the world of imagination. It is a world close to the fantasies of the subconscious and to dreams, but in my case, still closer to mysticism, religion and mythology. It is an introspective way of looking upon that which is at the base of our soul. It is an art which is closer to Jung’s psychological theories than to those of Sigmund Freud, closer to alchemy than to Newton. It has more relation to the irrational than to the rational, and therefore it has very little in common with Impressionism or Cézanne and a great deal in common with Surrealism or the Baroque.¹⁴¹



Fig. 39 Bele Bachem, *Alchimistenpaar* (*Alchemist Pair*), 1964, Casein, 54 cm x 81 cm.

¹⁴¹ Francesca Fuchs, “Interview: Ernst Fuchs, April 24, 1981, Vienna.” in *Ernst Fuchs* (Milano: Electa Editrice, 1984), 24-25.



Fig. 40 Bele Bachem, *Porträt des Malers Ernst Fuchs mit Frau als Alchimistenpaar* (Portrait of the Painter Ernst Fuchs with his Wife as an Alchemist Pair) or *Christina und der Alchemist* (Christina and the Alchemist), 1964, oil, 56 x 81 cm.

Using modern Surrealism as a vehicle for expression, the visionary fantasies of Fuchs's work are devoted to the spiritual exploration of the metaphysical planes of consciousness, with a marked fascination with mystical religions and the esoteric practices of alchemy and magic. Both Fuchs and Bachem shared an admiration for Flemish painters, such as Bruegel and Bosch, and similarly explored the Old Master medium of egg tempera. Though Bachem's technical style, favoring looser, more expressionistic brushwork, lacked the academic precision of Fuchs's technique, both artists experimented with the distortion of the human body in varying degrees of mannerist-inspired exaggerations. Sharing similar sources of artistic inspiration and a mutual interest in the expression of inner fantasies, the work of Bele Bachem seems to betray the influence of the Viennese School of Fantastic Realism. Furthermore, the artist Ernst Fuchs seems to have played a critical role in informing the alchemical and magical iconography of Bachem's later paintings,

as she utilized his likeness to symbolize the spiritual figure of the artist, representing him in various compositions as a “priestly sorcerer” who is capable of magical transformations. Yet, Bachem’s work, with its playful humor and satirical eroticism, lacks the underlying prophetic vision of Fuchs’ art in using spiritual symbols to convey a utopian perspective.

Combining primitive science with esoteric philosophy, alchemy was practiced throughout the Dark Ages, the Renaissance, and even as late as the eighteenth century as an early form of pharmaceutical chemistry. The metaphorical reading of the alchemical process as a life-generating act represents creation of life through sexual reproduction. This concept is charged with potent symbolism, and its symbolic iconography can be used as a valuable tool for artistic expression. Alchemy appears as a central subject throughout the history of art, from didactic medieval manuscripts that contain the cryptic secrets of alchemy to seventeenth-century Netherlandish genre paintings that romanticize the character of the alchemist himself. In modern and contemporary art, conceptual and artistic “alchemy” are employed as metaphors for human sexuality, gender relations, and for the transformative abilities of the artist himself.¹⁴² References to alchemical processes are pervasive throughout the work of female surrealists, functioning as a useful metaphor for the repossession “of creative powers long submerged by Western civilization.”¹⁴³

In 1968 Bele Bachem was awarded the top prize at the Surréaliste Salon international de la Femme in Casino Municipal de Cannes for her 1964 work *Alchimistenpaar* (*Alchemist Pair*) (Fig. 39). As one of her most famous compositions, the scene incorporates the majority of iconographical symbols of alchemy, magic, and surrealism seen throughout her paintings. In this scene, Bachem casts Ernst Fuchs and his wife Christina as two alchemists engaged in the esoteric

¹⁴² Jacob Wamberg, *Art & Alchemy* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2006), 172.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 175.

ritual of transmutation. The alluring female alchemist, wearing a slithering snake in her hair, holds a precarious tower of four stacked eggs and coyly glances at her swarthy male counterpart, who carefully drives a knife into the largest egg that spews forth a red, blood-like liquid. Various symbolic objects and animals—a snail, an open book, an alchemical alembic—appear on the table between them, and oddly-shaped vessels, intact eggs, birds, and a menacing cat-like creature are seen on the background ledge. Employing her characteristic distortion of perspective, Bachem depicts the central transformative moment of the Magnum Opus. This alchemical process, which yields the Philosopher's Stone, is also referred to as "the Great Work," and requires the fusing of the two opposing elements of Philosophic Sulfur and Mercury within an egg-shaped vessel or "Ovum Philosophicum." The egg is then hermetically sealed, and when heated over a fire, the alchemical liquor undergoes a series of chemical transformations, from the black "crow's head" state to the white "swan" state. Finally, the egg is broken to release the mystical substance, imbued with the ability to transmute lead into gold and prolong life. Bachem captures the transformative moment, as the Philosopher's Stone is released in its final form from its ovular vessel.

The mysterious figure of Ernst Fuchs embodies the archetype of the artist as source of transmutative powers, with the "magical ability to transform banal subject matter with the aid of (often shoddy) materials into that complex and hugely expansive artifact termed 'art.'"¹⁴⁴ Christina, the female alchemist, becomes the focal point of the composition and of the alchemical act, as her erotic female body symbolizes the role of the alchemical eggs as embryonic vessels. Bachem's alchemical portrait of Ernst Fuchs and his wife can also be read as a metaphor for sexual intercourse, but most importantly speaks to the artist's personal admiration for the founder of the Vienna School of Fantastic Realism.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, 173.

Erotic Fantasies and Satire of Bachem's Female Portraits

Central to Bele Bachem's late paintings are her portraits and depictions of females.

Though many of the women seen in these portraits were inspired by people in her own life, Bachem translates their forms into fantasy portraits. Ranging from doll-like depictions of erotic *femmes fatales* as in *Kammerjägerin in der Nacht der Füchse* (Fig. 34), to ugly, satirical renderings of aging women, Bachem's portraits illustrate a spectrum of female personalities.

Kampmann's discourse on Bachem's female portraits describes them as follows,

Fortunately these men are in the company of women, and what women! So high, we would never have dared to aspire: they must at least be princesses from the circus, of course, who are the guests currently performing in the suburbs, henna-haired cousins of the famous Siamese twins from Oktoberfest. Fortunetellers at heart, they are admitted into the best circles, coffeehouse ladies in the finest underwear and wearing hats like chrysanthemum wreaths. Their flesh is of waxen perfection, and it substantiates the seductiveness of feminine lingerie. We have never been bewitched so knowledgeably. On *petit fours* of the Belle Epoque which do not mind being brought into such dubious stretches of land, gorgeous girls and young women are depicted with voluptuous, callipygian forms, and over high slender little barstools they wear little lemon breasts. What makes the beauty of these ladies all the more precious is not least of all that we feel that it would not survive the day. It is infinitely vulnerable and most importantly, highly ephemeral. Bachem's images also show [these females'] opponents, pushing wilting matrons into view, whose beauty is "on the decline" as the French so elegantly say, obese corpulent beings worthy of pity, who belie their age, and wearing jewelry and adornments, their last defense against looking old. Also they still wear large, extravagant hats. But they're more like the domes of poorly ventilated mausoleums. Not the School of Fontainebleau, so eager for the "Blasons anatomiques du corps féminin," not Rubens looking for the velvety incarnations of female flesh, not Boucher at his easel in Rococo boudoirs, nor Franz Winterhalter in all his stylishness have known how to reveal the secrets of female beauty and powers of seduction.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁵ "Glücklicherweise sind diese Herren in Begleitung von Damen und was für Damen! So hoch hätten wir nie zu trachten gewagt: es müssen mindestens Prinzessinnen sein, vom Zirkus natürlich, der gegenwärtig in der Vorstadt gastiert, hennaverschönte Kusinen der berühmten siamesischen Zwillinge vom Oktoberfest. Wahrsagerinnen auch, die in die besten Kreise eingeführt sind, Kaffeehausdamen in der feinsten Unterwäsche und mit Hüten wie Chrysanthemenkränze. Ihr Fleisch ist von wächsender Makellosigkeit, und man ermißt die Verführungskraft weiblicher Dessous. Niemals sind wir kundiger betört worden. Auf Kanapees der Belle Epoque, denen es nichts ausmacht, in solch bedenkliche Landstriche gerückt zu sein, sind traumhaft schöne Mädchen und Jungfrauen mit ausladend kallipygischen Formen gelagert; und über hohen, feingliedrigen Barstühlchen werden makellose Zitronenbrüstchen getragen. Das Collier, welchen nach ihnen züngelt, ist eine Asklepiosvipere, deren Auge glitzernde Steine sind. Was die Schönheit dieser Damen um so kostbarer macht, ist nicht zuletzt, daß wir

Often juxtaposed with ironic depictions of androgynous males with full hips and elongated limbs, the majority of Bachem's women assert a position of dominance. As seen in the painting *Blinde Braut (Blind Bride)* (Fig. 41) from 1977, the male is depicted as a squat dwarf who sits in the voluptuous lap of a giant female, while androgynous half-butterfly figures float between doorways in the background.



Fig. 41 Bele Bachem, *Blinde Braut (Blind Bride)*, 1977, pastel, 98.5 cm x 54 cm.

fühlen, sie werde den Tag nicht überdauern. Sie ist unendlich verletzlich und vor allem höchst ephemär. Bachems Bilder zeigen auch ihren Widerpart, drängen doch allenthalben auch welkende Matronen ins Blickfeld, deren Schönheit "auf dem Rückweg" ist, wie die Franzosen galant sagen, erbarmungswürdige Dickleibigkeiten, welche mit ihrem Alter in Streit liegen und an Schmuck und Putz auch das letzte Geschütz ins Feld führen. Auch sie tragen noch große, extravagante Hüte. Aber die sind mehr wie die Kuppeln schlecht gelüfteter Mausoleen. Nicht die Schule von Fontainebleau, so sehr erpicht auf die "Blasons anatomiques du corps féminin" nicht Rubens auf der Suche nach dem samtigen Inkarnat weiblichen Fleisches, nicht Boucher an seiner Staffelei in Rokoko boudoirs, noch Winterhalter in all seiner Mondanität haben alle Geheimnisse weiblicher Schönheit und Verführungsmacht zu offenbaren gewußt." .” Kampmann, "Und Proserpina Freut Sich Doch," VII.

The man sits with crossed legs, and is under the full control of the “blind bride.” In many of her paintings, Bachem reverses gender roles in terms of scale, as well as by the use of ambiguous androgyny. In her highly erotic renderings of the half-clothed women whose breasts and thighs seem to burst from their frilly lace bras and garters, Bachem objectifies the female form as a sexual entity. However, these women derive power from their sexuality, which is often represented in the form of occult or psychic objects that appear in previously discussed paintings, such as *Porträt einer Wahrsagerin* (Fig. 37) and *Alchimistenpaar* (Fig. 39).

In portraits such as *Die grosse Puppe* (*The Large Doll*) (Fig. 42) from 1967, she portrays the female with the “innocent and yet dangerous appeal of the doll.”



Fig. 42 Bele Bachem, *Die grosse Puppe* (*The Large Doll*), ca. 1967, Casein, 124 x 35.5 cm.

The seated female with large eyes and girlish curls stares out coyly, as she seems to beckon suggestively with her right hand. Her tattered clothing seems to reveal more than it conceals, as her “little lemon breasts” and large thighs are shown in full view. The sensuality of the doll forces the viewer into a voyeuristic position, inciting an erotic gaze, and embodying the fantasy of an erotic Galatea-figure. A canvas rests on the windowsill, with a painting of a young girl in a chaste, white lace dress whose pure appearance contrasts starkly with that of the doll’s, acting as a pictorial foil. With this comparison, she castigates the sexual availability of the erotic doll, while also conveying the temporary nature of female virginity. This juxtaposition of the sexualized female body as a toy with the image of a virgin girl represents the opposing identities that are often simultaneously enforced by society.

Bachem explores another contrasting set of female identities in the painting *Drei Kaffeehausdamen und der Apfel des Paris* (*Three Coffeehouse Women and the Apple of Paris*) (Fig. 43) from 1964. The title evokes the mythological tale in which Hermes charges the Trojan mortal, Paris, with the task of giving a golden apple to the fairest goddess of all. Each of the contenders—Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite—attempted to bribe Paris with offers of power, wisdom, and skill, but ultimately Aphrodite’s promise to give him the most beautiful mortal woman, Helen of Sparta, won out. In this painting, Bachem engages in a satirical indictment of the perception of female beauty in a style of satirical caricature that recalls the paintings of *Neue Sachlichkeit*. The young, beautiful woman with exposed breasts in the center is flanked by the two ghastly older women who dine with her in the coffeehouse. A young man peers in longingly from the window as a voyeur and consumer of the young woman’s beauty. The woman in the foreground is rendered with an ugly bird-like face, which contrasts with her fanciful hat and strings of pearls, elements that make her appear all the more grotesque and repulsive. In the

background, a woman with severe features wears a ridiculous bow-topped hat and holds a lap dog against her enormous, sagging breasts. With a sense of humor, Bachem exaggerates the figures to a comical degree, illustrating the ephemeral nature of female beauty that quickly fades into the grotesque reality of old age.



Fig. 43 Bele Bachem, *Drei Kaffeehausdamen und der Apfel des Paris* (*Three Coffeehouse Women and the Apple of Paris*), 1964, casein, 80 x 60 cm.

The majority of Bachem's female portraits incorporate elements of the fantastic or are rendered through the lens of satire. However, paintings such as *Nina mit Katzen* (*Nina with Cats*) (Fig. 44) from 1963 represent a more intimate, personal form of portraiture inspired by real persons. Expressively rendered with passionate brushstrokes, the sitter, who gracefully rests on her side in the company of three odd-looking cats, seems to embody the ideal female bohemian with her open book. Bachem kept the company of many female friends throughout her life, including one Nina Adler, who is assumed to be the sitter in the painting. Many of her more intimate portraits of women take on this Parisian salon-style sidelong pose and convey a more subdued eroticism that is not ironic or exaggerated. Some speculation has surrounded the sexuality of Bele Bachem, but according to her daughter, Bettina, "she loved men and she loved women, but whenever she was unhappy it was because of a man."¹⁴⁶ Regardless of her sexual preferences, Bachem artfully expressed the various manifestations of the female identity, from *femme fatale* to waggish crone.



Fig. 44 Bele Bachem, *Nina mit Katzen* (*Nina with Cats*), 1963, casein, 45 x 120 cm.

¹⁴⁶ Bettina Böhmer.

Influence of Travel

Following the marriage of her daughter in 1960, Bachem regularly took extended vacations for months at a time visiting friends in Spain, Greece, and Africa. Splitting her time between painting in her Schwabing studio and taking extended excursions to exotic locales in Ethiopia, Morocco, and Pakistan, Bachem was influenced by both the cultural milieu of Schwabing and the experiences of her world travels. The landscapes of Beate Bachem's paintings of the seventies and eighties are strongly inspired by her excursions to Africa, Greece, and the Middle East, and express the visual and emotional experiences of her travels.

On the subject of travel, Bachem affirmed that it “stimulates mediated change in thinking, changing deadlocked ideas, [and] makes you curious. But it's also sad and resigned.”¹⁴⁷ The 1975 painting *Garten Eden* (Fig. 45) seems to evoke the sentiment of the lone, introspective traveler. Featuring a seated colossal female statue in the foreground of a barren mountain landscape, it was inspired by a specific moment of intense fear, which Bachem experienced while travelling in the Peloponnesian region of Greece. In the 1986 *Frauengeschichten* television interview, Bachem recalls a harrowing incident in which she fell severely ill on an outing with friends, and decided to walk home alone, quickly becoming lost for hours in the mountainous landscape of the Peloponnese. Suddenly, rocks began tumbling down the mountain, and she experienced a moment of sublime terror. After surviving the frightful incident, Bachem visualized the transcendental moment in which she overcame the fear in the painting *Garten Eden*.

¹⁴⁷ Beate Bachem, “Reisen,” in *Beate Bachem: Ein Leben der Kunst gewidmet* (Rolandseck: Galerie Rolandshof, 1984), 34-35.

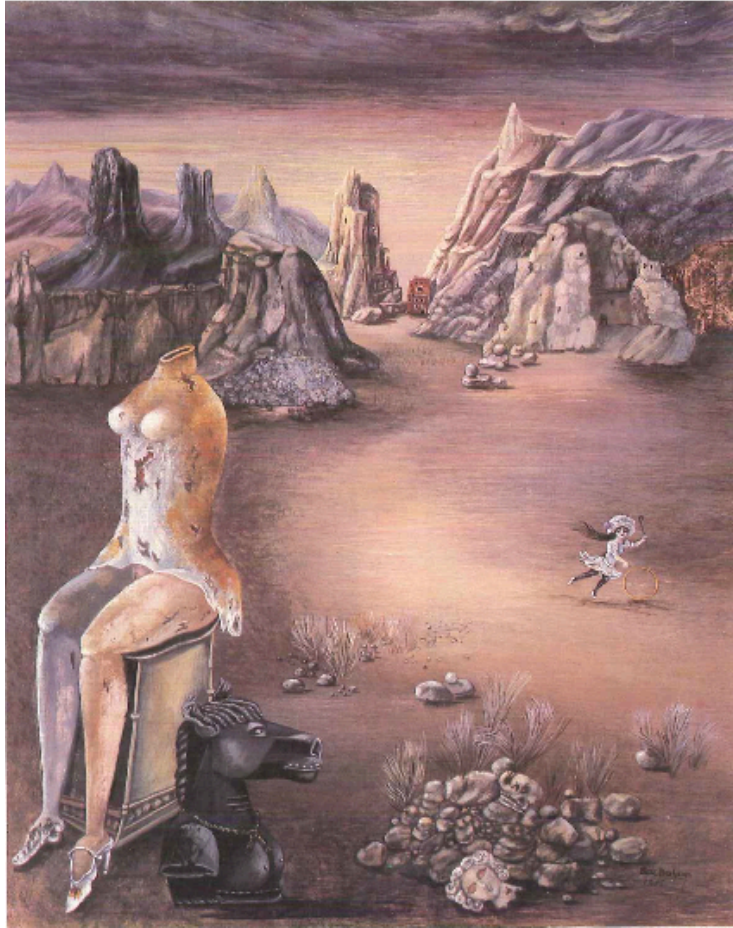


Fig. 45 Bele Bachem, *Garten Eden (Garden Eden)*, 1975, Casein, 71 cm x 56 cm.

In 1965, Bachem travelled for the first time to Ethiopia, where she stayed for two months with a close friend. The topographical and architectural features of her subsequent paintings resemble the extra-planetary rock formations native to Ethiopia, and the ornamented Islamic architecture of the Middle East. Typified in the 1984 work, *Und Zuletzt kommen die Clowns (And Last Come the Clowns)* (Fig. 46), the unusual rocky terrain and oriental architecture of Africa and the Middle East become regular features in the surreal landscape of Bachem's paintings. Daring subsequent excursions to Morocco, Pakistan, India, and Turkey, Bachem became fascinated by the cultures and people of these exotic locales, completing dozens of portrait sketches and studies of foreign faces and places she visited. Many of the human figures

that appear in the landscapes of her work in the seventies seem to be inspired by the diverse ethnicities of the people she encountered, specifically a handsome swarthy man with a mustache, whose face appears in multiple paintings and drawings. Seen in the painting *Goldener Vater* (*Golden Father*) (Fig. 47) from 1968, this man appears in the foreground, holding a small girl on his shoulder. In the background, foreign figures emerge from tents, possibly inspired by the nomadic bedouin tribes of the Middle East. Though this man is not identified by name, one can assume that he had a personal significance for the artist. Bachem continued to travel throughout the world for the rest of her life. To put it in words of the artist herself, “Ich liebe die Malerei, das Reisen und die Liebe (I love painting, travelling, and love).”

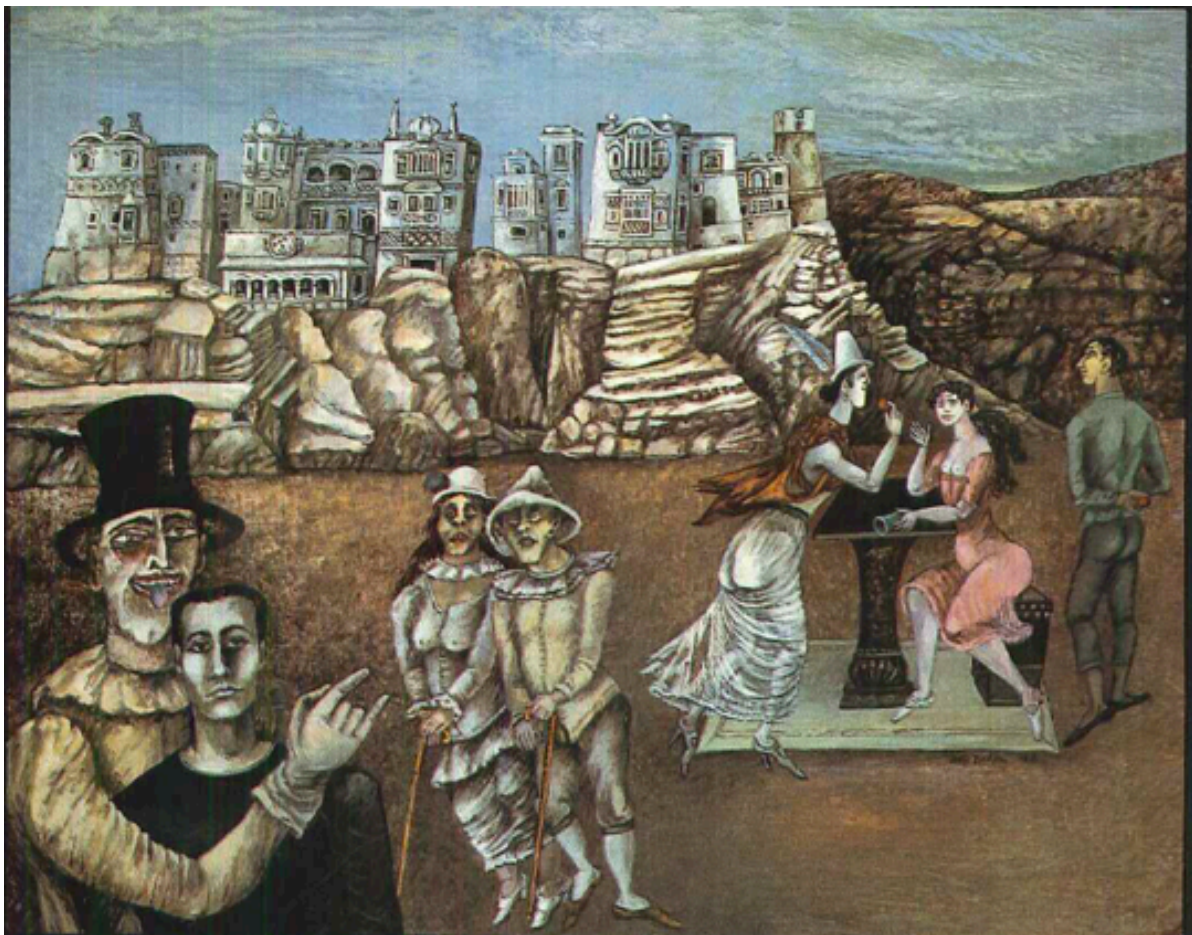


Fig. 46 Beate Bachem, *Und Zuletzt kommen die Clowns* (*And Last Come the Clowns*), 1984, egg tempera, 73.5 cm x 60 cm.

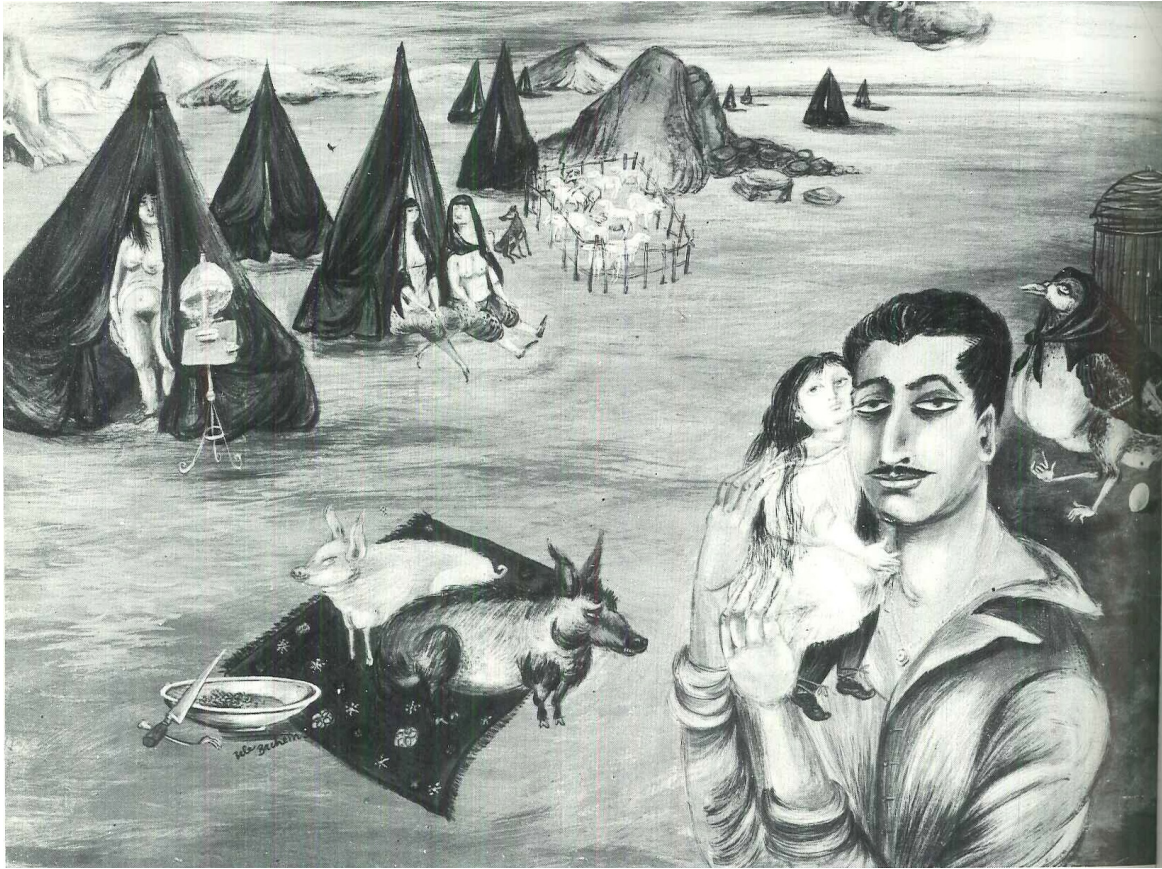


Fig. 47 Bele Bachem, *Goldener Vater (Golden Father)*, 1968, casein, 70 x 45 cm.

CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION

In the conclusion to her autobiographical essay, Bele Bachem humbly avows her beliefs about the profession of painting:

It is the audacity of the naïve attitude to dare to paint. Fantasy, observation, sharp criticism must be something philosophical and a big portion of vitality. Not to mention color and spatial awareness. The more you paint, the more you are an apprentice.¹⁵⁴

The significance of Bele Bachem's work can only be comprehended through her paintings.

Through these dream-filled landscapes, the shy painter, who has been called an "evil fairy story teller,"¹⁵⁵ a "painting sorceress," and "an alchemist of color," reveals her true identity.¹⁵⁶

Filtering her autobiography through the lens of magical realism, Bachem infused her paintings with bewildering elements of fantasy and caricature, which rely on a complex iconography of symbols, landscapes, and people—both real and imagined. The artist, "with own her light and creative hand conjures up a world of nuances of the ambiguous and the fantastic, enriched by fabled beings such as sphinxes, hermaphrodites, half-butterfly humans, snakes, oriental odalisques, and those half-naked, voluptuously sensuous, fully female figures alongside [her] feminized men, which define her fairy-world."¹⁵⁷ According to a passage written by Bele Bachem's husband, Günter Böhmer, "One could imagine the pictures of Bele Bachem as paintings in Etruscan tombs, the meaning of which puzzled scholars."¹⁵⁸ As the narrator of her

¹⁵⁴ "Es gehört die Verwegenheit des Naiven dazu, das Malen zu wagen. Fantasie, Beobachtung, scharfe Kritik muß sein, etwas Philosophisches und eine große Portion Vitalität. Von Farb- und Raumgefühl nicht zu schweigen. Je länger man malt, desto mehr ist man Lehrling." Bachem, "Mein Vater hat mich gewandelt."

¹⁵⁵ "Erzählerin böse Märchen," Hans Theo Rommerskirchen, "Erzählerin böser Märchen." In *Bele Bachem: Ein Leben der Kunst gewidmet* (Rolandseck: Galerie Rolandshof, 1984) 2.

¹⁵⁶ "malende Zauberin," "eine Alchimistin der Farbe" Sauré, "Die künstlerischen Paradiese der Malerin Bele Bachem."

¹⁵⁷ "[...] beschwört mit leichter und eigenschöpferischer Hand eine Welt der Zwischentöne, des Vieldeutigen und Phantastischen, angereichert von Fabelwesen wie Sphingen, Zwitterwesen aus Schmetterling und Mensch, Schlangen, orientalischen Odaliskinnen und jenen halbnackten, vollweiblich-sensuellen Frauengestalten, die neben den feminisierten Männern ihre Feenwelt bestimmen." Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ "Man könnte sich gewisse Bilder der Bachem als Malereien in etruskischen Gräbern vorstellen, über deren Bedeutung die Gelehrten rätseln." Böhmer, "Vorwort."

own dreams, Bachem conveyed a cryptic storyline of dark fantasies and ironic beauty of her paintings. Her distinctive style, which combines caricature and surrealism, is adept at expressing the ironic idylls of the depths of her subconscious, as each painting becomes a form of a self-portrait for the eccentric Schwabing bohemian, Bele Bachem.

Living more than thirty years in her top-floor Schwabing studio apartment, Bachem remained a local celebrity and a fixture of the Munich-Schwabing bohemian quarter. In 1986, she was awarded the prestigious *München leuchtet* (Munich Shines) medal to celebrate her legacy and outstanding service to the city of Munich.¹⁵⁹ She continued to paint, draw, and travel as much as she could in her old age, but eventually fell ill in 2005 and could no longer work. Later that year, Bele Bachem passed away in a Munich hospital after surgical complications, with her daughter Bettina by her side. She was eighty-nine.¹⁶⁰

Throughout the history of art, artists are categorized and compartmentalized into convenient categories of style, movement, or affiliation, favoring the inherently human instinct to comprehend through classification—to grasp something unfathomable by giving it a name. Condensing the history of art into a well-ordered nomenclature endeavors to make art more accessible through the macroscopic narrative framework, synthesizing the aesthetic, political, philosophical, and historical conditions of an artist into a single “ism”. However, there are many important artistic outliers who cannot be historicized in this way, and are therefore overlooked and undervalued. Bele Bachem is one of these artists.

For most of her career, Bachem remained in Germany and only exhibited in New York once in 1983 at the prestigious Bodley Gallery.¹⁶¹ She was not business-minded and had a strong attachment to her paintings, so she was frequently reluctant to sell her work. Yet there seem to be

¹⁵⁹ Gärtner, *Bele Bachem: Werkverzeichnis 1935-1986*, 408.

¹⁶⁰ Bettina Böhmer.

¹⁶¹ Gärtner, *Bele Bachem: Werkverzeichnis 1935-1986*, 409.

many other factors contributing to the disintegration of her legacy, and in the future I plan on investigating the possible structural reasons why many postwar German artists, such as Bele Bachem, have fallen into oblivion. Though I have endeavored to create a comprehensive document on the work of Bele Bachem, its prolific nature restricts a thesis-length discussion. Over 1,300 works are listed in her 1986 *Werkverzeichnis*, which is incomplete and has not been updated with her work after 1985. For my future academic pursuits, I plan on expanding this thesis to cover her entire multimedia oeuvre, further exploring the idiosyncratic fantasies of her life and work.

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APPENDIX

Interview Questions for Bettina Böhmer

1. How did Bele Bachem's work attract the attention of Nazi censors so early in her career?

What qualities of her art made it worthy of banning from public exhibition? Was it the erotic, feminist undertones in the drawings published in *Die Dame* and *Elegante Welt*?

(Wie hat Bele Bachems Arbeit die Aufmerksamkeit der Nazi Zensoren so früh in ihrer Karriere geweckt? Welche Qualitäten ihrer Kunst machten es würdig, von öffentlicher Ausstellung verboten zu werden? War es die erotischen, feministischen Unterton in den Zeichnungen in *Die Dame* und *Elegante Welt* veröffentlicht wurden?)

2. Bele is described in a few sources as "Erzählerin böser Märchen" as many of her paintings incorporate themes of magic, sorcery, alchemy, astrology, mythology, and fairy tales. What sources (literary or visual) influenced her use of these themes? Did she embody this title?

(Bele ist in einigen Quellen als "Erzählerin böser Märchen" beschrieben, wie viele ihrer Gemälde beinhalten Themen der Magie, Zauberei, Alchemie, Astrologie, Mythologie und Märchen. Welche Quellen (literarische oder visuelle) beeinflusst ihre Verwendung dieser Themen? Hat sie verdient diesen Titel?)

3. Bele's relationship with her father was critical in her development as an artist. How would you describe the appearance of the father figure in her work? How would you describe her paintings, *Vater und Kind* and *Vorführung für den goldenen Vater*? How did his death in the 1940s affect her work? What happened to her mother?

(Beles Beziehung zu mit ihrem Vater war kritisch in ihrer Entwicklung als Künstler. Wie würden Sie das Erscheinungsbild der Vaterfigur in ihrer Arbeit? Wie würden Sie ihre Bilder, *Vater und Kind* und *Vorführung für den goldenen Vater*? Wie hat bezeichnen sein Tod in den 1940er Jahren ihre Arbeit beeinflusst? Was geschah mit ihrer Mutter?)

4. How would you characterize Bele's portrayal of women? Many people have said that the erotic way in which she depicted them suggests a sexualized, objectifying male gaze. Yet, the women are also autonomous, independent figures within their settings, suggesting that they are erotic feminist heroes who derive their power from their sexuality. Their bodies look Rubenesque, was she directly influenced by him or any other artists in her depiction of women's bodies?

(Wie würden Sie Beles Darstellung von Frauen? Viele Leute haben gesagt, dass die erotische Weise, in der sie sie dargestellt hat einen sexualisierten, objektivierenden männlichen Blick vermuten lässt. Dennoch sind die Frauen auch autonome, unabhängige Persönlichkeiten in ihren Einstellungen, was darauf hindeutet, dass sie erotische feministischen Helden, die ihre Macht aus ihrer Sexualität ziehen. Ihre Körper sehen Rubenesque aus, wurde sie direkt von ihm oder anderen Künstlern in ihrer Darstellung des weiblichen Körpers beeinflusst?)

5. Did Bele consider herself a feminist? Did she have sympathies for the homosexual community? What was her attitude towards men? Many of the men in her work are feminized or are under a spell of female attraction (Anbetung).

(Hat Bele sich selbst als Feministin betrachtet? Hatte sie Sympathien für die homosexuelle Gemeinschaft? Was war ihre Haltung gegenüber Männern? Viele der Männer in ihrer Arbeit sind feminisiert oder unter einem Bann der weiblichen Anziehungskraft/Anbetung).

5. Who were the women that she named in her work? (Christina, Bettina Moissi, Cassandra, Sabine, Ophelia, Ingrid Zimmerman, Sali, Lilo, Laila, Elizabeth, Nina Adler, Pauline Bessia Loewenherz, Renate, Cornelia, Vera Eliashiv, Mirandula, Susanna) Were they figures from her personal life? If so, what kind of relationship did she have with these women?

(Wer waren die Frauen, dass sie in ihrer Arbeit benannt hat? (Christina, Bettina Moissi, Cassandra, Sabine, Ophelia, Ingrid Zimmermann, Sali, Lilo, Laila, Elizabeth, Nina Adler, Pauline Bessia Loewenherz, Renate, Cornelia, Vera Eliashiv, Mirandula, Susanna) Waren sie Figuren aus ihrem persönlichen Leben? Wenn ja, welche Art von Beziehung, hatte sie mit diesen Frauen?)

6. Many symbols appear in her work that seem to have an autobiographical significance. Eggs? Owls and birds? Anthropomorphized birds? Snakes? Butterflies? Cats? Cats with human faces? Tattered curtains? Fish? Horses? Scales? Snakes? Scissors?

(Viele Symbole erscheinen in ihrer Arbeit, die offenbar eine autobiographische Bedeutung haben. Eier? Eulen und Vögel? Anthropomorphized Vögel? Schlangen? Schmetterlinge? Katzen mit menschlichen Gesichtern? zerrissene Vorhänge? Fische? Pferde? Waage? Schlangen? Schere?)

7. How did Bele conceptually differentiate her provocative, erotic paintings and drawings from her more mainstream commercial work? How was she selected by Rosenthal porcelain to create designs?

(Wie hat Bele konzeptionell ihre provokante, erotische Bilder und Zeichnungen von ihr mehr Mainstream kommerzielle Arbeit unterschiedet? Wie wurde sie von Rosenthal Porzellan Designs zu erstellen entwürfe?)

8. In many sources she is described as a “literary surrealist.” Did she agree with this designation? Is *Adele lebt unstet* a surrealist work? Did she have a personal relationship with any surrealist artists? What was her relationship with Ernst Fuchs?

(In vielen Quellen wird sie beschrieben als "literarische Surrealistin." War sie mit dieser Bezeichnung zu frieden? Ist Adele lebt unsterblich eine surrealistische Arbeit? Hatte sie eine persönliche Beziehung mit allen Surrealisten? Was war ihre Beziehung zu Ernst Fuchs?)

9. I understand that Bele disliked being classified within the "-isms" and was a vehement individualist within the art world. In your own opinion, how would you describe Bele Bachem's art in terms of style and aesthetic influences? (Surrealism, Fantastical Realism, Neo-Expressionism, Weimar/Neue Sachlichkeit, etc.) Do you recall her favorite artists or artworks?

(Ich verstehe, dass Bele innerhalb der "-ismen" war unbeliebt und war ein vehemente Individualistin innerhalb der Welt der Kunst. Ihrer Meinung nach, wie würden Sie beschreiben, Bele Bachem Kunst in Bezug auf Stil und ästhetische Einflüsse? (Surrealismus, Fantastical Realismus, Neo-Expressionismus, Weimar / Neue Sachlichkeit, etc.) Erinnern Sie sich an ihre Lieblings-Künstler oder Kunstwerke?)

10. How did Bele Bachem's art contextualize the political and social atmosphere of Germany throughout the last half of the twentieth century? What made her return to painting exclusively in the 1960s and 70s? Would you say that she experienced the height of her career and style at this time?

(Wie hat Bele Bachems Kunst die politische und soziale Atmosphäre in Deutschland während der letzten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts kontextualisiert? Was hat zu ihrer Rückkehr zur Malerei ausschließlich in den 1960er und 70er Jahren beigetragen? Würden Sie sagen, dass sie den Höhepunkt ihrer Karriere und Stil in dieser Zeit erlebt?)

11. I read that Bele Bachem was awarded the highest cultural honor of Munich in 1986. How did her artwork contribute to Munich's art scene and community? How is her art remembered today in Munich?

(Ich ge lese, dass Bele Bachem die höchste kulturelle Auszeichnung von München im Jahre 1986 verliehen wurde. Wie haben Ihre Bilder zum Münchner Kunstszen e und Gemeinschaft beigetragen? Wie ist ihre Kunst heute in München erinnert?)

12. How did her world travels affect her work? There are pastel drawings of Indian and Pakistani families. Were these portraits?

(Wie haben ihre Welt reisen Auswirkungen auf ihre spätere Arbeit gehabt? Wie wurde sie in New York empfangen? Es gibt Pastellzeichnungen von indischen und pakistanischen Familien. Waren diese Porträts?)

13. Since Bele produced a large amount of commercial work in the field of "applied arts" she is often written off as an illustrator instead of a fine artist. Why do you think she has not enjoyed the same legacy that other German artists such as Ernst Fuchs and Kathe Kollwitz? How did Bele want to be remembered as an artist?

(Da Bele produzierte eine große Menge gewerblicher Arbeit im Bereich der "angewandten Kunst," wird sie oft als Illustratorin anstelle eines bildenden Künstlers beschrieben. Warum denken Sie, hat sie nicht das gleiche Vermächtnis genossen, als andere deutsche Künstler wie Ernst Fuchs und Käthe Kollwitz? Wie wollte Bele wollen als Künstlerin in erinnert werden?)

VITA

Lydia Dorsey was born in 1989 in Mobile, Alabama. In 2007, she moved to Baton Rouge to attend Louisiana State University where she graduated cum laude in December 2010, with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Liberal Arts with a concentration in art history and a minor in business administration. She returned to Louisiana State University to pursue her Master's degree in 2011, where she currently works as a graduate research and teaching assistant under Dr. Darius Spieth and Dr. Susan Ryan, as well as a content tutor at the Cox Communications Academic Center for Student Athletes. Her research interests are focused mainly with feminism and German postwar art, and she intends to pursue a PhD in art history in the near future. She is a candidate for the degree of Master of Arts in art history, which will be awarded in May 2013.