Rudi Lesser, *Untitled (Dog in the Ruined Quarter)*, 1956. Drypoint etching with aquatint. 13 x 19½ in. (32.8 x 49.9 cm). Private Collection, Berlin. Wvz R-N: DG-0402 (State II). © Grete Zieger and Kurt Lesser

Rudi Lesser: The Forgotten and Rediscovered Artist

Ori Z Soltes

Berlin-born Rudi Lesser (1902–1988) came by his artistic skills naturally. His earliest mentor seems to have been his aunt, Alice Reichenberger (sister of his father, Sally Kurt Lesser), a painter who had been a master student of Hans Baluschek (1870–1935)—himself a painter interested in modern developments. Baluschek focused on the working class in a rather impressionist style in terms of light and casual brushwork, but he was best known for fanciful illustrations for the children's book *Little Peter's Journey to the Moon* (*Peterchens Mondfahrt)*. He was branded a Marxist artist when the Nazis came to power and stripped of his positions; Alice, his student, was also labeled a degenerate artist, and deported to Theresienstadt. Lesser was very close to her—he did a number of portrait etchings of her later on (she survived the Holocaust)—and it was surely her influence that led him to become an artist, against the will of his mother, Leopoldine Flatow Lesser.[1]

Post-World War I Germany, buried in poverty and food-shortages, was as a whole not overly friendly to visual artists. Lesser nonetheless attended classes at Berlin's Kunstgewerbemuseum (Museum of Decorative Arts) from 1919 to 1923, studying under Ludwig Bartning (1876–1956), a landscape painter of fine but very conservative style, who was primarily an illustrator of botany books. Of interest for this narrative, Bartning would later, in 1944, be put on the list of "God-gifted artists" approved by Goebbels and the Nazis as representing the spirit of the state. Bartning's end-of-semester assessment referred to Lesser's ability and need to develop his skill further.

The aspiring artist moved on to study with Klaus Richter (1887–1948). Richter had moved from philosophy and languages to painting, eventually teaching from 1922 in Königsberg (which is where Lesser studied with him) and then from 1927 in the Berlin Academy of Fine Arts. He was the Chairman of the Verein Berliner Künstler (Berlin Artists' Association) until removed by the Nazi regime, but, interestingly, painted portraits of Goering—and one of Hitler that he did from hiding in 1941—unimpressed until he saw the contorted facial expression when someone mentioned "Jews."

Subsequently, and most extensively, Lesser studied with the impressionist Hans Meid at the Berlin Academy, from 1927. He was Meid's favorite student[2] and enjoyed early success and recognition for his etchings. In 1929, in the magazine *Kunst der Zeit*, critic Otto Brattskoven compared him to Toulouse-Lautrec and the highly regarded Austrian symbolist-expressionist printmaker, Alfred Kubin (1877–1959).[3] In reviewing these paragraphs one notes how the political and art historical context of Lesser's artistic training was interestingly complex—and made more complicated by the advent of the Nazis.

As both an art student and an emerging graphic artist, Lesser received high praise—from his teachers, from critics, and also from established artists who saw his work, such as Käthe Kollwitz and George Grosz. By 1922 he had already achieved some recognition: he did book illustrations through the intervention of Hermann Struck, the renowned graphic artist, whose 1908 *The Art of Etching* was the seminal work on that subject.[4]

Fig. 1 Rudi Lesser, *Untitled (Ring Fight)*, 1925–26. Drypoint etching. 7 x 7 ¾ in. (17.8 x 19.6 cm). Lindenau-Museum Altenburg. Wvz R-N: DG-0016 (State II). © Grete Zieger and Kurt Lesser

Etchings and lithographs became Lesser's primary media—particularly etchings, done with short, almost nervous strokes, depicting figures but also sometimes houses and, on occasion, landscapes that were usually representational, if stylized, and occasionally virtually abstract. Among the early works, from the 1920s and early 1930s, while his depictions of figures were often fairly straightforward and portrait-like, he also diverged into interesting and even unusual action images and to scenes associated with particular historical or even religious events.

Thus for instance, a 1925/1926 drypoint etching, *Untitled (Ring Fight)* [Fig. 1], presents a pair of wrestlers in what can be discerned as a fighting ring, with the suggestion of the ropes setting it off and beyond them a handful of crowded faces constituting an audience. The two figures are more than burly, both with shaved heads and intense expressions—or at least the left-hand figure, whose face can be more fully seen. A third figure, presumably the referee, is even larger and his image is not completed.

Another sort of broad and burly figure, but in a context at once historical and phantasmagorical is the key figure in his earlier (1922) drypoint etching *Untitled (Nero Before Burning Rome)* [Fig. 2], in which the bulbous, sandals-and-toga-clad emperor—his leafy crown placed so that at first glance it appears to be horns—dominates to the right. His leer and the viewer's eye wander restlessly across almost abstract snippets of river with its ferryman (suggesting Charon, the boatman for the dead on the River Styx in Hades), hilly turf with a crowd of presumed refugees from the burning city, a gigantic plant—and the dark city walls, beyond which an explosive, surging light envelops fragments of buildings.

Fig. 2 Rudi Lesser, *Untitled (Nero Before Burning Rome)*, 1923. Drypoint etching. 9 1/2 x 7 in. (23.5 x 17.4 cm). Private Collection, Berlin. Wvz R-N: DG-0009 (State II). © Grete Zieger and Kurt Lesser

Similarly bulbous is the central character in a second 1922 etching, *Untitled (Crucifixion Scene)* [Fig. 3]. It is a very dark and rather oddly composed image, in which that central figure appears to have a smile on his face, his right hand extended, perhaps with a tool held in it. To the viewer's right is the figure of the one being crucified, presented at a diagonal, as if the cross has not yet been fully installed in an upright position—and yet at the bottom there appear to be supports, as if this is the final positioning of the structure, which is not quite tall enough: the victim's feet seem to be dragging on the ground—and while his right arm is extended and his right hand appears to be fixed (possibly but not certainly nailed) to the cross, his left arm appears to bend at the elbow so that his left hand extends toward his own brow. There is no clear suggestion that this is *The* Crucifixion—of Jesus of Nazareth—no suggestion, for instance, of a crown of thorns on his head and the head in fact appears to be shaved.

Fig. 3 Rudi Lesser, *Untitled (Crucifixion Scene)*, 1922. Drypoint etching. 6 ¾ x 9 in. (16.7 x 22.7 cm).
Oberösterreichische Landesmuseen Linz. Wvz R-N: DG-0006. © Grete Zieger and Kurt Lesser

This begets the question: is this intended to be a visual exploration of the act of crucifixion, which the Romans enacted by the thousands, and without a direct relationship to the traditional image of Christ on the cross—or perhaps even intended to remind the viewer of how generic that form of Roman execution was? Is this possibly, more specifically, the

reflection by a Jewish artist on an event that has yielded such a long history of anti-Jewish sentiment—developed with particular vehemence in German-speaking, Lutheran lands, and thanks in particular to a German, Wilhelm Marr, having helped shape a race-based anti-Semitism since 1879?[5]

The issue of a Jewish underpinning to intense visual expressions of social consciousness is a somewhat abstract and always debatable issue, and difficult to prove. That said, it is of interest that also in 1922 Lesser illustrated the volume, *The Legends of the Talmud*, by Jakob Fromer (1865–1938), the first librarian of the Jewish community of Berlin.

Fig. 4 Rudi Lesser, *Pogrom in the Middle Ages*, 1930. Drypoint etching. 6 x 7 in. (15 x 17.4 cm). Leo Baeck Institute, New York 78.381. Wvz R-N: DG-0142 © Grete Zieger and Kurt Lesser

Nor is it insignificant that, among Lesser's imagery that reflects on everyday life and in particular on victims of injustice and oppression, there are images that have a specifically Jewish content—as in, for instance, his 1930 etching *Pogrom in the Middle Ages* [Fig. 4]. Depicting a vicious beating of Jews on the street—the image focuses in on a handful of figures, rather than presenting some sort of sweep—offers, at its center, a bearded Jew who wears the *pileus cornutus* (horned hat) required of Jews in most parts of Germany from the thirteenth century until the early nineteenth century, and is reflected visually even in illuminated manuscripts by Jews that depict ancient Israelites. There is something prophetic about this image, looking back centuries to the most obvious street-level basis for the soon-to-come Nazi-led violence against Jews in the Germany that Lesser would need to flee a few years after making this image.

In all of the phases of his work he demonstrated a gift for portraiture—a reflection of the intensity of his empathy and thus his ability to uncover the soul of his subject [Fig. 5]. This certainly included his last self-portrait, of 1987 [Fig. 6]. But the most compelling aspect of his work—in both the sense of what compelled *him* and the sense of what is compelling to the *viewer*—was his fervent opposition to injustice of any sort, which began in his youth with his energized embrace of leftist, people's causes and both derived from and led to his involvement in a broad circle of poets, philosophers, musicians, journalists, actors, dancers, and the like. Within the intense socioeconomic difficulties that Germany endured in the aftermath of World

Fig. 5 Rudi Lesser, *Grandmother Bianca Lesser*, 1930.
Drypoint etching. 5 5/8 x 4 1/2 in. (14.3 x 11.5 cm).
Private Collection, Berlin Wvz R-N: DG-0153 (State II).
© Grete Zieger and Kurt Lesser

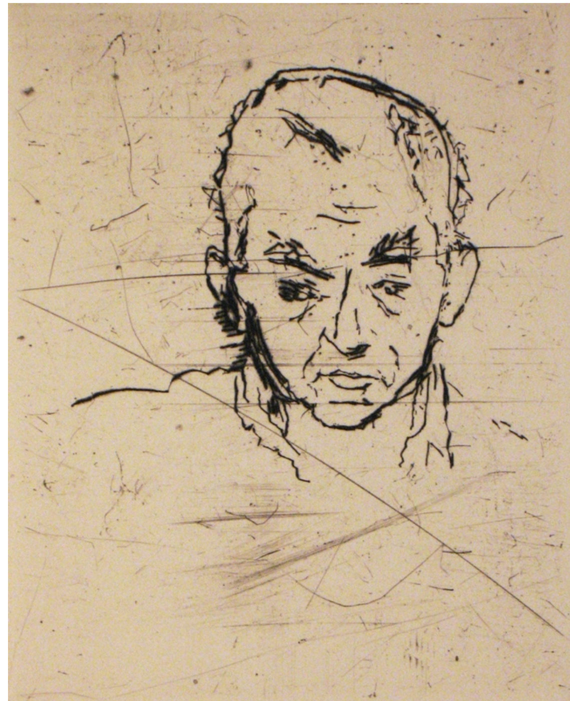

Fig. 6 Rudi Lesser, *Self-Portrait*, 1987.
Drypoint etching. 5¾ x 4½ in. (14.6 x 11.4 cm).
Private Collection, Berlin. Wvz R-N: DG-1081 (State I).
© Grete Zieger and Kurt Lesser

War I, he was drawn to Communism's ideology and stated goals of leveling the field of everyday life, in part by elevating the working classes—a political stance that he never abandoned in the course of his long life.

That "energized social engagement"[6]—his concern for "the so-called 'little people'—was always, wherever he lived, the most important thing. In Berlin it was the workers, in Denmark it was the fishermen and farmers."[7] [Fig. 7]. As Klaus Märtens wrote for the 2011 Galerie Taube retrospective: "He was a real human being (a *Mensch*)" who "stands uniquely apart—a loner—yet extremely sociable."[8]

Fig. 7 Rudi Lesser, *From Denmark (Worker in the Gravel Pit*), 1933. Drypoint etching. 9 3/8 x 11 3/4 in. (23.9 x 29.9 cm). Galerie Taube, Berlin. Wvz R-N: DG-0174. © Grete Zieger and Kurt Lesser

Prior to his flight from Germany, he typically spent his evenings in the Romanesque Café, with its bohemian world of poets, writers, well-known painters and actors. Money played no role for Lesser then, as a student, nor decades later, when he returned to Germany.

Cognate with this was his interest in the darker corners of urban landscapes, with which he became particularly conversant in the later part of his existence as an exile in Denmark, through the influence of his teacher there, Aksel Jorgensen. The spaces and structures inhabited by the socioeconomically oppressed and marginalized were for him, in and of themselves, metaphors for society's "little people." [Fig. 8]

Fig. 8 Rudi Lesser, *Untitled (Drunk Lying on the Street*), 1928. Drypoint etching. 4½ x 7 in. (11.9 x 17.8 cm). Private Collection, Berlin. Wvz R-N: DG-0092. © Grete Zieger and Kurt Lesser

These sorts of foci would flow organically into his interest and imagery in coming to New York, translated there into empathy both for the workers in general, and in particular, for the Black underclass that he encountered.[9]

One might note how this sort of social emphasis in his work—wedded to the skilled technique that had already been recognized by his first teachers—offers a parallel, by coincidence or not, to that very important aspect of art by Jewish artists ranging from Pissarro to Ben Shahn. Pissarro had argued in letters to his son that artists are obliged to share with the world whatever enlightenment they have gained in and from their art—a secular, visual form of *tikkun olam* (repairing the world); Shahn stood out as the socio-political artist par excellence, who through Social Realism sought to make statements about the injustices in the world and to push his viewers to recognize them. There is some irony in the fact that Lesser, in coming to New York, did not achieve the sort of recognition that Shahn and others of the same generation did—perhaps because by the time Lesser got there, Social Realism had already achieved its successes and was slowly being overtaken by Abstract Expressionism as New York asserted itself as the center of the art world.

Nor was his position in America with respect to artistic movements any different from where he was before or after his American sojourn: he never participated in the artistic movements in which one might suppose he would have in the avant-garde Germany of the post-World War I period: he remained always a solitary, independent artistic personality, very much connected to, reflecting on, and concerned about the world around him, but disconnected from particular modernist movements—although his *political* inclinations led him to membership from 1928 in the Association of Revolutionary Educational Artists of Germany (Assoziation Revolutionärer Bildender Künstler Deutschlands).

He nonetheless enjoyed the beginnings of commercial success signified by a 1931 exhibition at the Gurlitt Gallery[10]—but his career was truncated by the arrival into power of the National Socialist (Nazi) Party, whose shock-troops destroyed his studio not long after the Nazi take-over on January 30, 1933. Lesser's atelier was searched and laid waste by SA troopers in April, while he was not there.[11] Warned by friends that it was no longer safe for him to remain in Germany, Lesser fled the country on May 2.

The initial Nazi focus, one may recall, was *not* on anti-Jewish policies as much as on actions to destroy all political opposition. Interestingly, therefore, the persecution to which Lesser was subject, and the reason for his exile, was probably not his Jewish identity—nor, for that matter, the idea that his art was "degenerate" (*entartet*), since this issue had not yet fully ripened in the Hitlerian mind—but his leftist politics. There is little doubt that, had he stayed on for a year or two, both of those other aspects of who he was and what his art was would have caught up with him. The Nazis in any case managed to destroy not only his studio but the slow yet steady success that he was beginning to enjoy as an artist.

The refuge that he sought and found was in Scandinavia. The story of his flight is not that simple: as an exile, he traveled—from September 1933 through the end of June 1934—through Belgium, France, Holland, and England, before arriving back semipermanently to Denmark. Among his fellow exiles while in Denmark, he met Kamma Svensson in Copenhagen; she was a Danish painter who had also studied in Berlin with Hans Meid. She introduced him to her friend, the painter and graphic artist, Gudrun Flyge, who became his wife in 1937.

Fig. 9 Rudi Lesser, *Boats on Ven Island (Boote auf Ven)*, 1936. Drypoint etching with aquatint. 11 7/8 x 15 7/8 in. (29.5 x 39.9 cm). Private Collection, Berlin. Wvz R-N: DG-0211. © Grete Zieger and Kurt Lesser

Through Svensson he also met Kaj Ejsten and gained access to the artist's colony, Odsherred, about sixty kilometers west of Copenhagen on the large island, Zealand, a venue in which artists interested in landscapes particularly thrived. Svensson also facilitated an introduction to her painting teacher, the above-mentioned Aksel Jorgensen. Lesser became his student, which helped lead to exhibition opportunities—not a simple matter under the political conditions.

In 1936, he and Gudrun were able to travel to Paris—where, in June, he marched with workers striking against the Renault car manufacturer—and also to spend some time in Ostend, Belgium, with his friend Felix Nussbaum from Berlin—they had both been master students of Meid at the same time. In Ostend he and Nussbaum met the old master, James Ensor. Although there is no evidence of any sort of influence on them from Ensor—he may or may not have impressed Lesser and Nussbaum—there is plenty of visual evidence in Lesser's work from this period of the presence of Ostend itself [Fig. 9].

Of course the world was soon stumbling downhill toward war, and the small personal world of Rudi Lesser was imploding. The German army would occupy both France and Denmark by 1940. In that same year, Felix Nussbaum would be arrested by Belgian police and by 1944 would, together with his extended family, be murdered by the Nazis. Lesser's young wife would also die in 1940, two years after the birth of their son, Kurt. All of this led, not surprisingly, to an existential crisis and a multi-year artistic silence: a pair of works done in 1940 and in 1944 and nothing (known at least) in between. What one can assert is that he survived the war. Between its end and 1946, the beginning of his time in the United States, he seems only to have produced one or two noteworthy artworks.

Perhaps only one: his 1946 drypoint etching, *Lovers with Bird* [Fig. 10], is powerful and moving, particularly given its potential biographical context. Semi-abstract, its frenetic lines yield the naked figure of a woman to the left—one can discern her enormous right eye and right breast—and, virtually faceless, a male figure leaning down in an embrace. The bird, such as it is, sits off to the viewer's right, as if on a little hillock.

Fig. 10 Rudi Lesser, *Lovers with Bird*, 1946. Drypoint etching. 8 3/8 x 7 in. (14.3 x 11.5 cm). Private Collection, Berlin. Wvz R-N: DG-0267. © Grete Zieger and Kurt Lesser

And as one's eye responds to the visual ambiguities of some of the thick and thin lines, one can easily derive the suggestion of a small child—just in from the leftmost area of what might be taken as part of the outline of the woman—his head turned out toward the viewer, his two eyes closed, his right arm reaching up as if to embrace both of his parents. It is not difficult to interpret this work as an image of Lesser himself (become faceless in the aftermath of the multiple emotional traumas that he has endured), his wife and their son—watched over, as it were, by the odd-shaped bird (symbol of the soul) through which "supervision" he survived but she did not.

Or might we see it otherwise? His emotional survival may be connected to the relationship he developed with another Danish woman, Else Lonberg Jacobsen, with whom he had a daughter, Grete, in 1944. It would seem that he was no longer around when Grete was born, although at some point after the war he established direct contact with her: he did a drypoint-etching portrait of her [Fig. 11]—she is the dominating background figure for an equally dominating flower bursting in the foreground—in 1958, after he had returned to Germany from his decade-long sojourn in the United States. He would not have been present at her birth because in the autumn of 1943, the occupying Germans announced plans to deport all indigenous and refugee Jews from Denmark. This prompted the now-renowned, heroic rescue of over 7,000 Jews—including refugees from Germany, like Lesser: hundreds of Danes volunteered to row them in small boats across the water to neutral Sweden. Not a small task, since not only were the Danes evading the Germans, but they had to avoid the Swedish Coast Guard, since it was technically illegal for refugees to enter the country.

Fig. 11 Rudi Lesser, *Grete (The Artist's Daughter)*, 1958. Drypoint etching. 15½ x 8 in. (39.5 x 20.3 cm). Private Collection. Wvz R-N: DG-0516. © Grete Zieger and Kurt Lesser

Lesser and his four-year-old son, after several failed efforts and dramatic moments (Kurt needed medication that was not easily come by), finally made it to Sweden. One sees the visual reflection of this in a 1955 woodcut, *Untitled (Night Crossing)* [Fig. 12]. Perhaps, as Volkmar Reichmann has suggested, Lesser's turn for this scene to the woodcut medium is in and of itself

a reference and a tribute to the small wooden boat that carried his son and him to safety: subject and material merge. Reichmann also notes that the passenger in the front of the boat, turned toward the viewer, has a head that very much suggests a skull: death rode with them on the dangerous crossing.[12] Again one might also see an inherent ambiguity: Lesser himself has died—the Lesser of the first four decades of his life, including most emphatically the previous ten years of tumult and loss—even if, on the other hand, this passage carries him to the first stage of rebirth, into a new life. Once in Sweden, Lesser's relationship to wood would be directly connected to his survival and that of his son, albeit by a different path: he would find work as a lumberjack. So too, however, through friends he was also able to find some recognition as an artist; he participated in an exhibition mounted in Stockholm in 1944 devoted to the work of immigrant artists from all over Europe who had found their way there.

Fig. 12 Rudi Lesser, *Untitled (Night Crossing)*, 1955. Woodcut. 20¾ x 9 5/8 in. (52.3 x 24.1 cm). Private Collection. Wvz R-N: DG-0389 (State III). © Grete Zieger and Kurt Lesser

His friends back in Germany had no idea where he was or whether he was still alive throughout the war. His fellow student Wolf Hoffmann later recalled: "We heard nothing from each other for a long time. Then indeed, in 1946, when, we were kind of annoyed, there came an angel of a postman one day bearing one of those legendary Care Packages in his hand. It came from New York; its sender: Rudi Lesser."[13]

For while Lesser initially returned to Copenhagen from Sweden at war's end, in 1946 he and Kurt were able to come to New York. Rudi's mother was already there, as was his brother (also named Kurt), who had found his way to America back in 1926. He also had a letter of introduction from George Grosz to the well-known photographer and gallerist, Lotte Jacobi. In recognizing *Lovers with Bird* as coming from the beginning of Lesser's time in New York, and his attempt to find his way into its art world, the greater degree of abstraction than is ordinarily the case with his work makes a particular sense: the dissolving of the figure partially melts his work into the abstract expressionist reality into which he is never fully subsumed.

His brother apparently had the connections to help facilitate the invitation in 1948 for Lesser to become the first professor appointed to the faculty of the newly formed printmaking department at Howard University in Washington, DC—one of the premier historically African American institutions of higher learning. There could hardly have been a more appropriate academic institution with which Lesser could have been affiliated, given his strong sympathies for the Black community—he had become a member of the NAACP soon after arriving to the United States.

Interestingly, however, he taught at Howard for only one or possibly two semesters. It is not clear why he was there for such a brief period of time. It is certainly possible that he simply was eager to get back to focusing entirely on his art, and back to the New York art scene—which also provided a far less segregated, northern, environment than Washington offered. The art archives of Howard University preserve ten sheets of Lesser's work; indeed his clear if modest success as a teacher and as an artist while in America is reflected in the fact that his work is also preserved in the collections of Harvard University, the Leo Baeck Institute, the New York Public Library, MoMA, the Smithsonian Institution, the National Gallery of Art, the Baltimore Museum of Art, and the Library of Congress, to name the most prominent. He also exhibited in a number of outstanding museums and galleries. Nonetheless the decade that he spent in the US was less than happy. Fritz Cremer, writing in 1982 about Lesser for a pamphlet produced by Galerie Mitte, observed that "these were the loneliest and saddest nine years of his life."[14]

The post-war decade was both exhilarating and difficult for the United States. On the one hand, there was an exponentially increasing expansion of the American role within the world and, within the country itself, an explosive, socioeconomically motivated migration out of the cities into the newly developed phenomenon of the suburbs. On the other, there was rapidly increasing paranoia once the exhilarating feeling of victory over the Nazis had worn off—when the Soviet Union had been an ally—and an increasing sense of threat from Communism and the same Soviet Union and its profoundly genocidal leader, Joseph Stalin. That paranoia in the first half of the 1950s balanced on two legs: the Korean conflict—which was

never officially labeled a war—and the Joseph McCarthy witch hunts that decimated diverse strata of American society, but in particular the arts stratum.[15]

American art, particularly centered in New York, reflected both aspects of America, one might say: The large, unframed canvasses typical of Abstract Expressionism that dominated the scene, on the one hand (Pollock et al., the Gesturalists/Actionists), expressed a powerful American energy but also resonated with trauma from the tearing apart of the world so singularly symbolized by the crematoria and the double explosion of the atom bomb. On the other hand, the Chromaticists/Color Field painters (Rothko, Newman, et al.) expressed an equally energized will to *put the world back together* on the canvas. If Pollock drove the viewer's eye into the exploding image, Rothko drove the viewer's eye toward the unifying center of his three-fold, canonical compositions.

Neither of these related visual realities was a place into which Rudi Lesser seemed interested or able to fit himself. Even in pushing toward abstraction in the one available instance from the beginning of that period (*Lovers with Bird*, as previously noted), his more natural habitat, however stylized, was the representational vocabulary that he had honed for two-and-a-half decades before arriving on these shores, with their relatively straightforward narrative content. That said, Lesser did enjoy, as previously noted, some modest success, exhibiting at a number of New York venues—most notably, at Lotte Jacobi Gallery. Jacobi herself had fled Nazi Germany in 1935.

In any case, Lesser decided to go back to Germany in 1956. Not only was America "a lonely and sad time," but as Wolf Hoffmann wrote: "For [Lesser], Berlin was still the capital city of the world."[16] He ended up living in poor conditions in the Kreuzberg district—staying for a long time in the partially ruined spaces above the Leierkasten Bar, and then on Solmsstrasse—but in contact with other artists and the Berlin painter-poets such as Günter Bruno Fuchs, Kurt Mühlenhaupt, Peter Blaar and others. There, indeed, the middle-aged Communist could turn again to the "life of the simple people" and to the darker but romantic side of the city. In his prolific works he showed Berlin's walls, streets, open spaces, people. Once again, as in the twenties and early thirties, his evenings centered on his favorite bar, where he would habitually show up and play chess for hours with his friends. Every evening through the window one could see his back as he bent over the game board.

Lesser found limited work in his métier, participated in a few smaller exhibitions, and did cover illustrations for the local newspaper, the *Kreuzberger Neue Zeitung.* So the return home was positive as far as his artistic productivity was concerned, albeit not so much as far as recognition was—but then, as we have noted, money and recognition were not particularly important to him. And in spite of straitened circumstances, he managed to travel throughout much of Europe and North Africa. There is in any case a good number of works already from the 1956–1957 period in a range of graphic media, from etchings to colored woodcuts. He had returned to a Germany that was clearly very different from the country from which he had fled more than twenty years earlier: not only divided—its former capital itself separated by a wall—but with the ruinous evidence of the war still scarring the landscape. More precisely, eleven years after the war had ended with much of Germany—at least in the West—having been

rebuilt, he sought out sites of rubble and ruin to underscore what Hitler had done to the country, symbolized by its fractured urban landscape.

Fig. 13 Rudi Lesser, *Untitled (Dog in the Ruined Quarter)*, 1956. Drypoint etching with aquatint. 13 x 19½ in. (32.8 x 49.9 cm). Private Collection, Berlin. Wvz R-N: DG-0402 (State II). © Grete Zieger and Kurt Lesser

Among his more startling images is a drypoint etching with aquatint, *Untitled (Dog in the Ruined Quarter)* [Fig. 13], in which the large barking canine in the foreground leads the eye toward the vague buildings and their empty-looking windows, in the background— and toward the question of what it is the dog is barking at. He seems surrounded by shadows, but there is also the hint of a figure ensconced in a mandorla-like glow just over the horizon line toward which the dog seems to look. Perhaps it is simply toward the war-torn past that he barks so vehemently.

His own dog, Trolly, was in fact his most constant companion during this period: He would stroll with Trolly, who would perform little tricks and accompany Lesser in the evening to the bar and its chessboard. His political convictions turned to the anti-nuclear movement, for which he designed some unusual leaflets. His last book-related work was a series of illustrations for Alfred Döblin's *The Library*.[17] Although few and far-between, he had a few solo exhibitions by the late 1970s: one in 1975 at Galerie Taube and another organized by Galerie Franz Mehring in 1978 that traveled to Düsseldorf, Berlin-Kreuzberg, and Felix Nussbaum's hometown, Osnabrück, and he participated in a small number of group exhibitions. Most

notable among these were several in Kreuzberg itself, in 1966, 1967, 1968, and 1972. But fundamentally, having been forgotten during the war, now, more than a decade after the war had ended, he could no longer really connect to Germany. Even the traveling exhibition generated little excitement. He experienced the condition of the returning emigrant hoping to begin again, to build from the incipient renown that preceded emigration, but for Lesser, it would seem too much time had passed: he was now part of what has been called the *lost generation*.

If he cannot be said to have had great commercial success or widespread recognition at any time in those last thirty years in Germany, neither was he entirely obscure. "The art business may be said to have forgotten him after his return home, but there were those who knew him and who never forgot him," observed Hans W. Korfmann in the June 2014 issue of the *Kreuzberger Chronik* (no. 159), in discussing the 1978 traveling exhibition. In the brief text in the catalogue of that exhibit, Wolf Hoffmann wrote: "He is one of the last local originals, who found a home in Kreuzberg in his restless life, in a corner of his favorite bar, his shaggy dog under the table, an eraser plate—and a piece of sausage for the dog—always in his briefcase."

He produced a large number of diverse landscapes and portraits, recording insightful impressions from traveling about and rediscovering his homeland and the larger continent of which it is part. The several hundred lithographs that he produced during the years back in Germany reverberated from the town of Erkrath (where he went to visit his daughter, Grete) to Paris to Portugal. His last works demonstrate the same power of line and space that defined his art fifty years earlier. If there is a change, it is that the political element has been largely abandoned in favor of stylized landscapes that are, simply, *landscapes*.

His 1986 drypoint etching of *Portinho* [Fig. 14] (done after his last trip to Portugal, following surgery for the malignant, right-kidney tumor that would ultimately take his life) offers a—presumably intentionally—unfinished, sketch-like composition of counterweights: the geometries of bunched-together, man-made structures balanced by the irregular, space-filled, natural forms of trees; the background hillock on one side and the empty expanse of sky—without sun or a single cloud—on the other. It is not merely that humans (and animals) are missing from the scene (as opposed to the *evidence* of the human presence in the humble buildings)—it was rare in his earlier work, even in landscapes and seascapes, not to have at least a few humans placed within the image—but that there are no images of humans, per se, at this last point in his life. It is as if he and his art have allowed themselves to dissolve gently away from the human realm with its social, economic, political, religious, and racial injustices and its wars and destruction into the realm of nature in which the only human presence is the occasional evidence of creative construction.

There is an important exception to this turn from human figures: a 1987 drypoint-etching self-portrait [Fig. 6]. Looking down, not out toward the viewer, the image is accomplished, as so often by Lesser, with an economy of line rather than an accumulation of individuating detail. The scratches across the surface—in particular the two diagonal lines that form a kind of wedge-shape across the eyelines and the collar, and the pair of horizontal lines that frame the mouth, help turn the image into the suggestion of a cracked mirror. So we see

the reflection of the artist in a deliberately imperfect, unfinished, humble and unassuming image. It is also an image in which one cannot easily discern the subject's age: he could be twenty-five just as easily as eighty-five years old. The artist reflects his own unaging, consistent art: loss and reclamation, a fundamental homelessness embedded within a sense of belonging anywhere and everywhere he can find a few friends and family members and continue to produce images—these are all there, woven with the delicate filaments of this image of himself.

Fig. 14 Rudi Lesser, *Portinho*, 1986. Drypoint etching. 11½ x 19 ½ in. (29.7 x 49.6 cm). Private Collection, Berlin. Wvz R-N: DG-1079.
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He died not too long thereafter, at the age of 85, and was buried in Cemetery III of the Jerusalem and New Church Congregation in Berlin-Kreuzberg. There was a portrait of him done by Tuula Taehtela—wife of the piano-maker who moved into Lesser's apartment over the Leierkasten Bar when he moved to Somstrasse—that the landlady bought and hung on the wall by the spot where he had always sat, playing chess. After she died, the image disappeared.

More than thirty-five years later, in 2014, The Browse Gallery in Marheinekeplatz in Berlin mounted a large exhibition of Lesser's graphic work. The massive agglomeration, subtitled *A German modernist painter—pursued, forgotten, rediscovered*, and curated by Volkmar Reichmann, included some 1200 known works. Their scope and quality reminded the viewer of why the one-time master student had captured the attention of acknowledged art-

world stars like George Grosz—and why the experts were unified in their sense that Rudi Lesser, in his early twenties, belonged "to the most gifted and promising of the young graphic artists in Germany," before whom a great career seemed about to unfold.

Rudi Lesser, Solmstrasse, 1975. Photograph by Volkmar Reichmann © Volkmar Reichmann

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[1] I wish to acknowledge as a key source for information in this essay the research and writings of Volkmar Reichmann, who remains the consummate authority on Rudi Lesser's life.
[2] Franz Hermann Franken, *Hans Meid: Leben und Werk* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Edition Cantz, 1987), 196 ff.
[3] Otto Brattskoven, "Rudi Lesser," *Kunst der Zeit*, 1929, 137.
[4] *Die Kunst des Radierens* was a textbook offering both theory and practical instruction. Struck's students included important artists such as Max Liebermann, Jacob Steinhardt, Lesser Ury, Lovis Corinth and Marc Chagall.
[5] Marr's Essay "Der Weg zum Siege des Germanenthums über das Judenthum" (The Way to Victory of Germanicism over Judaism), which reached extreme renown by the 12th edition of 1879, warned that "the Jewish spirit and Jewish consciousness have overpowered the world." He called upon his fellow Christian Germans—his "fellow Germans"—to resist "this foreign power" before it was too late. He referred to that power as a race—Semites—from the Asiatic Middle East, as opposed to a religion.

[6] The phrase is Volkmar Reichmann's, in his essay, "Rudi Lesser, 1902–1988: Von Meid's lyrischen Impressionismus zu Lessers expressivem Realismus," in the 2015 volume published by the Hans-Meid-Stiftung, *Hans Meid und seine Schüler* (Petersburg, Germany: Michael Imhof Verlag), 106. All translations from German in this essay are my own.
[7] Ibid, 107.
[8] See Klaus Märtens, *Rudi Lesser 1902–1988. Grafik aus sieben Jahrzehnten* (Exhib.cat.; Berlin: Galerie Taube, 2012).
[9] Reichmann 2015, 107.
[10] This very influential gallery was associated with the same Hildebrand Gurlitt who subsequently—in spite of being half-Jewish—became one of Hitler's key procurers of art (acquired by purchase, exchange, or theft) across Europe during the war.
[11] The paramilitary Sturmabteilung (Assault Division) was the primary Nazi "security force" until it was succeeded in that role by the SS.
[12] Reichmann 2015, 111.
[13] Hoffmann was writing in the June 2014 issue of the *Kreuzberger Chronik* (no. 159).
[14] Fritz Cremer, "Über Rudi Lesser," in *Faltblatt zur Ausstellung Rudi Lesser,* Galerie Mitte, *Faltblatt zur Ausstellung*, Spring, 1982.
[15] Germany itself was plunged ever more deeply into its separate Western and Eastern political identities—a duality that began in 1949 and culminated with the raising of a wall by the Communists, emphatically dividing Berlin, in 1961.
[16] *Rudi Lesser: Radierung Holzschnitt Lithographie. Werke, 1921–1978*. Kunstmuseum Düsseldorf, Kulturamt Berlin-Kreuzberg, Städtisches Kunstmuseum Osnabrück, 1978.
[17] Döblin was, like Lesser, a Jew who was forced to flee Nazi Germany to the United States (where he converted to Catholicism) but returned immediately after the war—around the time when Lesser was moving to America. He moved permanently to Paris at about the time that Lesser was returning to Berlin.

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