

Passionate idealist

Johannes Esser

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Exhibition space 2

Johannes Esser – Passionate idealist

In 2022, the Mondriaanhuis acquired nine early works by Piet Mondriaan from the former art collection of Johannes (Jan) Esser. Esser was not only an art collector, but also a general practitioner, a plastic surgeon with ideals, an entrepreneur and Dutch chess champion. With the exhibition Johannes Esser – Passionate idealist, the Mondriaanhuis sheds light on the turbulent and multifaceted life of a passionate art collector.

In a period of barely seven years, Johannes Fredericus Samuel Esser (1877-1946) assembled an impressive art collection. At its peak, his collection of drawings, watercolours, oil sketches and paintings consisted of more than 800 works. The then young general practitioner collected works by Breitner, Sluijters, Gestel and the young Piet Mondriaan, among others. Esser owned no less than 10% of Mondriaan's currently known works. Esser's direct relationship with artists was characteristic of his approach to acquiring art. He visited the painters in their studios or met them at the Arti et Amicitiae artists' association. Esser also organised art gatherings in the

basement of his home on Willemsparkweg in Amsterdam. In November 1919, Jan Esser decided to auction off a large part (156 works) of his collection. One of the buyers was collector Helene Kröller-Müller. She went home with no fewer than 41 works.

Exhibition space 6

A lonely child

Johannes (Jan) Esser was born in Leiden in 1877, the son of Jan Esser senior and Jannetje Esser-Boekee. The young Esser was fourteen when both his father and grandfather died within six months of each other. Both had been important role models for him.

Esser later wrote in his memoirs that he owed his creativity, independence and love of art to his father. He attributed his willpower to his grandfather, who also taught him to be economical with his time, money and talent.

After the death of her husband, his mother Jannetje fell into depression and was admitted to an institution. Jan and his sister Betsy ended up in a foster family. During this period, the boy struggled at school. He felt out of place, performed poorly and was regularly bullied by his classmates. Fortunately, he found a way out: chess. He turned out to be very good at it.

Chess champion

In his foster family, Jan Esser gets to know his neighbour Leen Spruyt. This milkman teaches him the basics of chess. The boy quickly proves to be talented and joins the chess club. Jan wins so often that the newspapers write about him in glowing terms. This is good for his self-confidence. 'It stimulated my energy, willpower and perseverance, and hostility and bad luck could no longer affect me. I was filled with optimism and zest for life and the certainty that I would be able to achieve more and more successes,' he writes years later.

Chess remained a major hobby for Jan during his studies and beyond. Unlike other competitive chess players, he hardly ever studied the games of chess grandmasters. "Experience is the best teacher," he believed. His sharp insight and tactical thinking took him further and further. In 1913, Esser won the Dutch chess championship and was crowned the best in the country.

Pioneer of plastic surgery

After completing his medical studies, Jan Esser first worked as a ship's doctor and then as a general practitioner in Amsterdam. After the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, he wanted to join the British and French as a war surgeon, but they rejected his offer. Esser therefore moved to Germany and worked successively in Berlin, Budapest and Vienna as a surgeon on the German and Austro-Hungarian side. He treated thousands of wounded soldiers, often with horrific facial injuries sustained in trench warfare. Through this intensive practical experience, Esser

rapidly developed new surgical techniques and became one of the founders of plastic and reconstructive surgery. He is best known for his innovative use of skin grafts and various other techniques that laid the foundations for modern facial reconstruction. Esser left behind more than 100 valuable publications on plastic surgery. He also invented special instruments, including the “Esser forceps”, which are still in use today.

Friend and discoverer of young artists

Much of the art that Jan Esser acquired between 1906 and 1912 was purchased directly from the artists themselves. Esser was the general practitioner and friend of George Hendrik Breitner, who was already a well-known painter at the time. Through Breitner, he came into contact with young artists such as Jan Sluijters, Leo Gestel and Piet Mondriaan. Esser met the new generation of artists during weekly gatherings he organised in the basement of his home on Willemsparkweg in Amsterdam or at the artists' association Arte et Amicitiae. He regularly visited their studios, where he purchased paintings that were, so to speak, still wet with paint. Sometimes he acquired art as payment for medical assistance he had provided. Jan had a penchant for the exploratory and often more daring way of depicting drawings and sketches. This is also reflected in the collection he built up.

Exhibition space 7

Absent husband and father

In 1911, Jan Esser meets the young Olga Hazelhoff Roelzema when he treats her at his general practice. Later, their paths cross again in London during a chess tournament. They fall in love, Olga asked him to marry her, and they married in 1912. Together they have three children: Eli (1913), Maarten (1918) and Carla (1920).

When Olga becomes terminally ill and dies in 1924, Esser almost completely abandons his role as a father. Instead of keeping the family together, he places his children with relatives and acquaintances throughout Europe. Jan himself continues to travel, do business and pursue his ideals. It is not until Christmas 1925 that the family is reunited in Strasbourg.

In 1928, after an appendectomy in Leiden, Esser meets nurse Aleida de Koning. They marry a year later in France; as a wedding gift, he gives her a castle. Their three daughters, Boudewina (1933), Annie (1935) and Olga (1936), grow up largely in the absence of their father, who is too busy realising his ideals, just like Esser's first family.

Castle owner

After the loss of his first wife Olga, Esser settled with his children Maarten, Carla and Eli in a castle in the French village of Faye-la-Vineuse in early 1927. The castle, located on a hill, is called La Grillère.

Esser had the castle completely restored and furnished it as a complete work of art: with antique furniture, murals and paintings by old masters. Art was visible throughout the house.

La Grillère was not only a residence but was also sometimes transformed into a theatre. Esser organises costume parties and tableaux vivants in a medieval atmosphere, in which his children imagine themselves to be real castle dwellers. When Esser marries Aleida de Koning in 1928, he gives her a second castle as a wedding gift: La Roquereyne.

Passionate idealist

Through his work with mutilated war victims, Jan Esser devises a grand plan: an independent surgical free state.

In this free state, people with congenital abnormalities and mutilations caused by disease or war will be operated on and rehabilitated. Esser also wants to establish a university where doctors can specialise in plastic surgery.

To realise his ideal, the enthusiastic doctor travelled throughout Europe and managed to establish contact with numerous dignitaries, scientists and world leaders. He sought support from Queen Wilhelmina, Einstein, Mussolini, Pavlov, Marconi and many others.

His dream is almost within reach when the Greek government offers him an island. But when dictator Metaxas demands that two Greek agents be permanently present on the island, Esser withdraws. He wants complete independence – or nothing at all. The institute was never established, but his vision remains a progressive example of medical idealism and humanitarian ambition.

Entrepreneur

Jan Esser is astute and tirelessly ambitious. His boundless energy is evident from an early age: he studies quickly, sets up chess clubs, trades in real estate and builds up an impressive art collection in a short period of time. Jan's entrepreneurial spirit leads to grand plans, such as the idea for a surgical free state.

However, his ambition and restlessness also had a downside: it often came at the expense of stability for his family. In 1939, Jan fled to New York with his son Maarten. There, he lost his entire fortune on Wall Street due to a bad investment. Father and son then lived in a delivery van, while Jan performed operations here and there to earn some extra money. Eventually, they ended up in a squat in Chicago, where Jan's health deteriorated. On 3 August 1946, Jan Esser died on the doorstep of his home in Chicago, in the presence of his son.