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THE MISSING IMAGES

Eugeen Van Mieghem and the Jewish Emigrants to the New World

BY JEWISH MUSEUM PRAGUE
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 EMAIL
 



The third exhibition of the Jewish Museum in Prague on the phenomenon of emigration is devoted to the millions of inhabitants of Central and Eastern Europe who decided to leave for America between the end of the 19th and the first decades of the 20th centuries.

The port of Antwerp was one of the main points of departure, and up until 1934 the Belgian Red Star Line, with its efficient network of sales agents in the region and attractive pricing, alone transported ca. 2.4 million emigrants from Eastern Europe.

Among them were hundreds of thousands Jews from Eastern Europe and Russia, who were fleeing poverty, oppression, and persecution. The first large-scale wave of Jewish emigration followed the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881. Another wave followed the widespread Kishinev pogrom in 1903 and the failure of the democratic revolution of 1905 in Russia, which also sparked pogroms. Between 1881 and 1914, more than two and a half million Jews emigrated from Eastern Europe and Russia and another million left Europe from 1918 to 1939. The statistics show that over a fifty-year period nearly one-third of all Jewish inhabitants in Eastern Europe emigrated.

This exodus was depicted by the painter Eugeen Van Mieghem (1875–1930), who was born and lived his whole life in Antwerp. Since the time of his youth he was in contact with the vibrant world of dockworkers, sailors, and East European emigrants who would become the lifelong subjects of his work. His life witnessed the greatest expansion of the Antwerp harbor and the massive waves of emigration to America. During the First World War, the inhabitants of occupied Belgium became the subject matter of his drawings.

On show are 50 drawings and paintings by Van Mieghem as well as documentation about Red Star Line and period photographs of the Antwerp harbor. The exhibition was organized by the Jewish Museum in Prague in cooperation with the Eugene Van Mieghem Foundation with support of the Red Star Line Museum in Antwerp, and is being held under the personal auspices of Her Excellency Françoise Gustin, the Ambassador of the Kingdom of Belgium to the Czech Republic.

Eugeen Van Mieghem
(1875-1930)

Eugeen Van Mieghem was born in the port of Antwerp and spent virtually his whole life there. His father ran an inn on Montevideo Street, directly across from the Red Star Line warehouses. As a boy he witnessed the rapid expansion of the docks and the beginning of the mass emigration from Europe to America. Since his youth he had enjoyed observing the colorful world of boatmen, sailors, and especially the East European emigrants who soon became a main source of inspiration and the subject of his drawings.

In 1892, Van Mieghem was accepted as a student at Antwerp's Royal Academy of Fine Arts, a prestigious school offering a classical arts education. Yet it was not long before he was at odds with his professor, who considered his method of drawing too free and spontaneous and his choice of subject matter too dreary. He was dismissed from the Art Academy in 1896, at which point he found work at the docks while also continuing to devote time to his art. His work in charcoal and chalk displays his own distinctive style and brings to mind the works of Van Gogh, Daumier, and Toulouse-Lautrec. He professed a kind of "artistic anarchism" and read the poetes maudits and illustrated their verse. He also became involved in an anarchist club called De Kapel, and this imbued him and his work with a social consciousness. His work was exhibited for the first time in Brussels in 1901 as part of a group show alongside the leading French Impressionists.

After the death of his young wife in 1905, Van Mieghem went into seclusion and did not exhibit for many years. It was not until 1912 that he had his first solo exhibition, which was held at Antwerp's Royal Society of Art and was well-received by the critics. Van Mieghem remained in occupied Antwerp during the First World War, and his drawings captured the brutality of the occupiers and the suffering of the Belgian population. His wartime work is often compared to the work of Kathe Kollwitz, Théophile Alexandre Steinlen, and Jean-Louis Forain. He exhibited these drawings in Antwerp in 1919, and though it met with great success there were few buyers.

In 1920, Van Mieghem was appointed an instructor of life drawing at the Antwerp Art Academy. His late work showed more realism and a greater use of color. His health deteriorated over the course of the 1920s, and in 1930 he died of an aortic aneurysm at the relatively young age of fifty-four.

Address:

Jewish Museum in Prague – Robert Guttmann Gallery, U Staré školy 3, Prague 1

Open daily except for Saturdays and Jewish holidays: 9 a.m. – 6 p.m. (summer season) / 9 a.m. – 4.30 p.m. (winter season)
10 Sept. 2015 – 10 April 2016

Admission: regular CZK 40, reduced CZK 20, children under 6 free of charge.

www.jewishmuseum.cz

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