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Franz Radziwill (Strohhausen 1895 – 1983
Wilhelmshaven)

Die Bockborner Kirche (The Bockborner church)

Signed and dated lower right: 'Franz
Radziwill 1936'

Oil on canvas, laid down by the artist on
board

24 ¾ x 35 in. (63 x 89 cm.)



Provenance

Acquired directly from the artist by pastor Fritz Schipper, Varel, an active member of the *Confessing Church* (*Bekennende Kirche*), a religious opposition group against the Nazi controlled church in Germany.

By descent to his widow Ruth Schipper, Oldenburg, by 1941; and by descent in her family until sold Villa Grisebach, Berlin, 24 November 1995, lot 71 (427,000 Deutschmarks), There acquired by a private collector, South Germany; until 2022.

Exhibited

On long-term loan Kunsthalle, Kiel (until 1995);

Emden, Kunsthalle, Stiftung Henry Nannen / Ulm, Ulmer Museum / Moritzburg Halle, Staatliche Galerie, 1995, *Franz Radziwill 1895 bis 1983: Das grösste Wunder ist die Wirklichkeit*, no. 83;

Wilhelmshaven, Kunsthalle, 13 March 2011-15 January 2012, *Der Maler Franz Radziwill in der Zeit des Nationalsozialismus*, p. 84-85 (illustrated)

Literature

The artist's 4th handlist, no. 225.

Gerhard Wietek, *Franz Radziwill und Wilhelm Niemeyer – Dokumente einer Freundschaft, Oldenburg*, 1990, p. 149.

Andrea Firmenich und Rainer W. Schulze, *Franz Radziwill, 1895 bis 1983, Monographie und Werkverzeichnis*, Köln 1995, no. 427, colour ill. p. 168, pl. 82.

Birgit Neumann-Dietzsch und Viola Weigel, *Der Maler Franz Radziwill in der Zeit des Nationalsozialismus*, Wilhelmshaven 2011, p. 84-85 (illustrated).

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Franz Radziwill is renowned for his landscape paintings in a magic realist style and is also associated with the *New Objectivity* (*Neue Sachlichkeit*) movement in the Weimar Republic. The term *Magic Realism* was invented by the German artist and critic Franz Roh in 1925 to describe a shift from the spiritual and anxious art of the expressionist era towards a cold veracity and unsettling imagery (see the catalogue of the exhibition, *Magic Realism: Art in Weimar Germany 1919 – 1933*, Tate Modern, 2018-19).

Franz Radziwill started painting in 1919 when, aged twenty-four, he returned to Bremen from the front and was accepted by the *Berliner Freie Sezession* artists the following year as the youngest and last member of their group. In 1921, Radziwill visited the German seaside resort of Dangast, at the behest of Karl Schmidt-Rottluff who eleven years earlier had painted there his celebrated expressionist landscapes with their explosive colours. Radziwill's paintings with their vivid and striking colours clearly owe a great debt to the Brücke artists.

Franz Radziwill's *Die Bockhorner Kirche* executed in 1936 depicts an eerie, if not alarming scenery: cloud formations are raging like a crimson firestorm menacingly over a desolate village. The buildings, which have been rendered with fastidious care, attesting the artist's early training as a bricklayer, bask under the ominous glow of a firmament that is stormy and shaken. Such a dramatically represented sky draws a clear parallel to the fantastical cloudscapes of the painters of the Danube school of the early 16th century. Even a fleeting inspection of Albrecht Altdorfer's powerful *Resurrection* from 1518 (fig. 1), for instance, leaves no doubt in the viewer's mind that the present work owes a considerable debt to the painterly atmospheric innovations of three centuries prior. Yet whilst Altdorfer's scene of Christ's rising is peppered with figures, Radziwill's earth has no such audience. His unpopulated streets lend the scene a silence and sense of abandon that make the artist's vision of this small Friesland village hard to forget.

One would err, however, if they were to read this haunting image exclusively as a dark premonition of the terrors that were to unfold in the preceding years with the outbreak of World War II. Yes, the ominous character of this village speaks to an anxiety surrounding the culturally corrosive agenda being pursued by the National Socialist regime at the time but when considered within the context of Radziwill's oeuvre, it is clear that the present work is also situated within a broader development of the artist's visual language. In 1931 Radziwill joined the *Novembergruppe* and in 1933 participated in the exhibition *New German Romanticism* (*Neue Deutsche Romantik*) at the Kestner-Gesellschaft, Hanover, which showed works by other protagonists of this movement such as Georg Schrimpf and Alexander Kandoldt. These artists took inspiration from

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19th Century German Romanticism such as Casper David Friedrich (fig. 2), displaying a heightened sense of nature's sublime, uncontrollable power, unpredictability, and potential for cataclysmic extremes combined with an acute level of surreal detail. This creates in Radziwill's paintings the sense of a film still within a crucial moment, full of suspense, awe and terror. Roland März writes, "Through this fantastic realism, nature haunts as a juggernaut who threatens to devour everything around him...Radziwill provides imponderable situations of anticipatory expectation...[and] has found his way to really make the real unreal and the unreal real". (Roland März, 'Franz Radziwill – ein visionärer Realist' in A. Firmenich & R.W. Schulze, *Franz Radziwill, Monographie und Werkverzeichnis*, Cologne, 1995, p. 19).

It was Radziwill's association with Otto Dix that largely initiated this adoption of a style rooted in a lineage of Northern artist of the Renaissance such as Albrecht Durer and Matthias Grünewald. The two artists had a close working relationship in the late 1920s, with Radziwill posing for a portrait by Dix (fig. 3) and renting studio space from him between 1927-28. From this point onwards, Radziwill's work came to be filled with strange material, imposing simultaneously the most disturbingly irrational on subjects which were originally peaceful, such as villages, interiors, canals and riverbanks. Radziwill's paintings are meticulously rendered using a glaze technique adapted from the old masters. The results can be categorized as magic realism according to Sergiusz Michalski, who says of Radziwill's art: "The civilized world is dazzlingly—almost supernaturally—illuminated, set against a dark sky announcing imminent disaster. By means of this magic effect, the city and landscape motifs that Radziwill is depicting, of themselves familiar, are rendered strangely alien and sinister." A technique of smooth brushstrokes allied to intense and acid colours define an icy world. Upon inspecting Dix's output from this interwar period - supernatural landscapes such as *Lake Constance landscape in stormy weather* from 1939 (fig. 4), for instance - it is apparent that the inspiration flowed both ways.

Radziwill himself understood his works to be part of a *realist Symbolism* (*realistischer Symbolismus*): whilst executed with painstaking attention to detail and naturalism, the subject as well as the idiosyncratic colouration imbue the picture with visionary and symbolic meaning. Particularly the latter reveal Radziwill's origins in the German Expressionism. Of Radziwill's palette, Ulrich Gerster states in the catalogue raisonné: "Indeed, the works of the Dangaster artist retained traits of avant-garde art until the 1930s and early 1940s; first and most conspicuously in the use of colour. Railway bridges shine in bright yellow or sky blue, firewalls shimmer in deep green marble tones, and tombstones bear the colour of strawberries. The light often comes from somewhere outside; like a stage spotlight, it hits a house, a tree, while the firmaments shine blood red, quince yellow or deep black" (*Zwischen Avantgarde und Ruckwendung. Die Malerei Franz Radziwills von 1933 bis*

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1945, in Andrea Firemlich und Rainer W. Schulze, *Franz Radziwill, 1895 bis 1983, Monographie und Werkverzeichnis*, Cologne, 1995, p. 34). Such an observation situates the work in direct opposition to the aesthetic ideals endorsed by the Nazi party, who a year after this work was completed, declared Radziwill a degenerate artist. “Let no one say that these artists see things the same way” exclaimed Hitler during his opening speech at the Haus der Kunst in 1937, “Among the paintings submitted here, I have seen many a work where one must in fact assume that the eye shows some people things very differently from the way they are, that is, that there really are men who see the shapes of our people today only as degenerate cretins, who fundamentally sense – or, as they might say: experience – meadows as blue, the sky as green, clouds as sulphur-yellow, and so on.”

Following the party’s public disowning of Radziwill’s practice, the artist retrograded on his early commitment to National Socialism. He cultivated friendships with pastors of the Confessing Church (*Bekennende Kirche*) such as Otto Wellmann and Fritz Schipper, the latter of whom purchased the present picture from the artist. The Confessing Church was a movement within German Protestantism during Nazi Germany that arose in opposition to government-sponsored efforts to unify all Protestant churches into a single pro-Nazi German Evangelical Church. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who would ultimately be executed for his involvement in a plot to overthrow Hitler, became one of the leading spokesmen for the Confessing Church. In 1937, under the pretext of visiting Radziwill’s studio, a forbidden meeting of the Confessing Church took place in his house. The painter was subsequently interrogated by the Gestapo (see: Eberhard Schmidt, *Wohin in dieser Welt? Der Maler Franz Radziwill*, Halle an der Saale, 2019, p. 171). Dismissed from his position at the Düsseldorf Academy of Art and forbidden to paint, in the late 1930s Radziwill travelled to Africa and South America but was called back into military service during World War II and served from 1939-45.

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Fig. 1: Albrecht Altdorfer, *The Resurrection of Christ*, 1518, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria.

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Detail of fig. 1.



Fig. 2 Casper David Friedrich, *Neubrandenburg*, 1816.

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Fig. 3 Otto Dix, *Portrait of the painter Franz Radziwill*, 1928.

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Fig. 4 Otto Dix, *Lake Constance landscape in stormy weather*, 1939, mixed media on wood, 70 x 79.8 cm, private collection.