

The Silent Worlds of Helena Bochořáková-Dittrichová

At the end of World War 1, the Belgian artist Frans Masereel (a pacifist, then living in Geneva) worked with the Swiss publisher Edition de Sablier¹ to publish what is now recognized as the first wordless novel, *25 images de la passion d'un homme (21 Images of a Man's Passion)*. A product of the turbulent times it was conceived in, this slim book revolves around the life of a man who becomes a martyr of the working class, oppressed by the system, and struggling to survive in a fearful, domineering world. The decades between the wars were heady times of course. Political ferment was rife throughout Europe and various political forces elbowed for power and influence after the devastation of the Great War and the ensuing destabilization of social and economic norms.

Masereel would go on to publish several acclaimed wordless novels, most notably *Passionate Journey*, to a wide audience across Europe. Some of the German editions of his books, published by Kurt Wolff² went on to have introductions by such acclaimed writers as Max Brod, and Hermann Hesse. Masereel's influence would extend to other artists like Otto Nückel and the American illustrator and artist, Lynd Ward, whose wordless novel *God's Man* also became a success in the US. The popularity of wordless novels, running on a parallel track with silent movies at that time, reached their heyday during these artistically vibrant decades.

Masereel's wordless novels were influenced in part by the German Expressionists, as were some German movies, most notably the acclaimed expressionist film, *Das Cabinet des Dr Caligari* (written by Hans Janowitz and Carl Mayer, also both pacifists) that

premiered in Berlin in 1920. Like silent movies, wordless novels derive a lot of their power from the global nature of their compelling imagery. Anyone, anywhere, can take their own meaning from these art forms. Wordless novels can speak across cultural and linguistic divides and are more akin to music in that regard. Wordless novels also took their cue from Biblical mediaeval woodcuts, such as *Biblia Pauperum*,³ with their awkward perspectives and “crude” lines. Interestingly, the popularity of wordless novels began to wane with the introduction of talking movies, or “talkies” that were introduced to audiences in the early 1930s.⁴

It was during this tumultuously creative time, that a young woman, Helena Bochořáková-Dittrichová, having recently graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague (where she studied painting and drawing) received a scholarship from the Ministry of Education to study modern printmaking in Paris.⁵ While studying there she possibly came in contact with Masereel’s novels and became inspired to create her own wordless novel. In 1929 she would do just that. In an artistic world dominated by men, she went on to publish the first wordless novel by a woman, *Z mého dětství* (*From My Childhood*).

Helena Bochořáková-Dittrichová was born in 1894 in Vyskove, in Moravia, which is now part of the Czech Republic, which was formed in 1993. After the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the end of World War 1, the newly created Czechoslovakia was established in 1918.⁶ After been ruled for centuries by foreign entities, the newly formed state inspired artists to begin to create their own national visual identity and Helena was undoubtedly part of that endeavor.

Helena studied in Prague from 1919-1922, and a year after graduating moved to Paris. She exhibited widely during her time there, most notably in the Salon in Paris but she also exhibited as far afield as Philadelphia (possibly as part of the infamous Sequi-Centennial International Exposition in 1926) and Buenos Aires.⁷ She also traveled with her husband Vladimir Bochorak to the US in 1930 on a scholarship that he had received. She later returned to the Czech Republic, where she lived most of the remainder of her life in Brno, the capital of Moravia. She died there, aged 85, in 1980. Her work is currently in many prestigious collections in the Czech Republic including the Brno City Museum and the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague,⁸ and she is well-known as a pioneering printmaker and illustrator in the Czech Republic.

While the bulk of Masereel's work (and his contemporaries) is concerned primarily with socio-political concerns of the time, and is told from a decidedly male perspective, Helena's work revolves around scenes of domesticity, daily life, fundamental human interactions and from a feminist perspective. Her drawing style in *From My Childhood* differs markedly from that of Masereel. Helena's first wordless novel is noticeably less angular, less stylized and somewhat cruder in execution but it also has much lighter tone. Her later work went on to evolve both stylistically and thematically, and includes social themes, religious and historical events.⁹

Unfortunately, her work outside the Czech Republic is not widely available, and her books are quite rare, unlike those of Masereel. Doing a search on abebooks.com, for example, reveals the rarity of her publications.

There has been an attempt to correct this omission in recent years. In 2014, for example, the National Museum of Women in the Arts, in Washington, D.C. staged a small but important show “*The First Woman Graphic Novelist: Helena Bochořáková-Dittrichová*” of books that the museum had acquired.¹⁰ According to Heather Slania, the director of NMWA’s research center, “It’s great that there’s proof that there were women who were working in this very early art form. I’m hoping people will recognize her place, and the place of women at the beginning of things.”¹¹

It may be some time before the work of Helena Bochořáková-Dittrichová becomes more widely known outside the Czech Republic, and her name synonymous with wordless novels but her silent work can still speak across time. If some of her commanding work becomes reissued again, maybe a wider audience will be able to hear her silent world again.

Notes:

¹ Willett, Perry (2005). “*The Cutting Edge of German Expressionism: The Woodcut Novel of Frans Masereel and Its Influences*”. In Donahue, Neil H. [*A Companion to the Literature of German Expressionism. Camden House. pp. 111–134. ISBN 978-1-57113-175-1.*](#)

² Walker, George, editor. “Graphic Witness: Four Wordless Graphic Novels”, Firefly Books, 2007. pp. 21.

^{3,4} Donahue, Neil H., editor. “A Companion to the Literature of German Expressionism.”

NED - New edition ed., Boydell and Brewer, 2005. JSTOR,

www.jstor.org/stable/10.7722/j.ctt169wfmh.

⁵[http://www.bguthriepictures.com/Graphlib/GraphData14.nsf/Images/2014_DC_NMWA_Helena_0640/\\$File/NMWABD_140512_077.JPG](http://www.bguthriepictures.com/Graphlib/GraphData14.nsf/Images/2014_DC_NMWA_Helena_0640/$File/NMWABD_140512_077.JPG)

⁶ Hughes, Stuart, “*Contemporary Europe: a History*”, Prentice-Hall, 1961 p. 108

⁷ *Although I cannot find definitively whether or not Helena was in fact part of the 1926 Sequi-Centennial International Exposition in Philadelphia, it seems fair to say that as an international artist she could have been part of this exhibition. To read more about this infamous world’s fair, follow this link.*

Welcome | *Philadelphia Magazine*, Philadelphia Magazine,

www.phillymag.com/news/2017/05/31/1926-sesqui-centennial-exhibition-philadelphia/

⁸ BGuthrie Photos: DC - Natl Museum of Women in the Arts - Library Exhibit: The First Woman Graphic Novelist: Helena Bochořkov-Dittrichov,

www.bguthriepictures.com/graphlib.nsf/keys/2014_DC_NMWA_Helena

⁹ “National Museum of Women in the Arts.” 18th–19th Century | National Museum of Women in the Arts, <https://nmwa.org/learn/library-archives/library-exhibitions>

^{10,11} Brooks, Katherine. “Meet The World’s First Woman Graphic Novelist.” The Huffington Post, TheHuffingtonPost.com, 7 Dec. 2017,

www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/05/26/helena-bochoakova-dittrichova_n_5354241.html

Dermot Mac Cormack, January 2019

