

Crafting the Human Spirit

The magnitude of the Holocaust is often described as numerical figures: six million Jews, one-thousand ghettos, six years of war. This is through no fault of our own; we often struggle to wrap our minds around such atrocity and as a result almost *have* to consider scale. Numbers are tangible and concrete in a period of history where so many questions sit unanswered. Yet I think numbers create a dangerous simplification of the Holocaust and a lack of understanding surrounding the systemic nature of which it occurred. Prior to my Holocaust Studies course (which I began this semester), I was guilty of creating these generalizations and neglected to properly absorb what the Holocaust meant beyond those figures. It wasn't until I studied Jewish artists of the time that the depth of loss became more visceral. Together, they taught me one of the most important lessons which we can learn from the Holocaust.

My class recently studied a female, Jewish-German artist named Charlotte Salomon and the expansive series of work she made prior to her death at Auschwitz in 1943. It was because of her work that I began to feel the weight of the time seeping into my consciousness. In her series *Life? Or Theater?* Salomon explores the changing landscape of the world around her in a way that now feels ominous and foreboding. I am awestruck by her persistence in an otherwise extremely dark time, systemically created to force voices like hers into submission. By creating tirelessly and limitlessly Charlotte Salomon reinforces how strong the human spirit is. I feel that art amplifies this human strength: the use of bright color, vibrancy, and almost musical compositions is proof of this. It stands to show that Salomon experienced extreme loss in her 26 years of life. What should have extinguished the flame of creation instead seemed to fan it.

Salomon was one of many artists who experienced the depravity of the Holocaust firsthand and incorporated it into her art. Many of these artists had been formally educated at institutions such as the Bauhaus in the Weimar Republic. Yet pre-Holocaust sentiments and eventual loss of rights never made them come to a standstill and never made them compromise their identities. Many of them, such as Friedl Dicker-Brandeis, used what supplies they had access to while in ghettos and concentration camps. In an act of ultimate selflessness, Dicker-Brandeis shared what she had with the children within the same captivity. She knew the power of expression and how it would serve as a mediator between the disturbing realities they faced as well as the hope that it necessitated.

What can be learned from these artists is that they exist independently from statistics. They were people with a palpable sense of passion, hope, and artistry. They used their craft to sublimate from the horror of their world. It would seem, looking at the pieces, that all had not been lost. They are direct testimony to the atrocity that we often try to digest but can never quite swallow. They provide accounts that are tangible in a way that is evocative of the intense emotion needed to properly understand these events. By capturing the world as they saw it, artists of the time provided us a unique window into the past and a means to understand the world in a way that numbers simply cannot.