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Moessel in America: 1926–1957

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From successful start to financial ruin 1929

After several decades in the United States, Moessel looked back to the years in Germany as particularly easy. He said his private commissions supported him "without much effort but with great success". Of the disastrous inflation of the 1920s he later wrote that "I saw my market shrinking and could expect that I, too, would come to suffer if business and labor came to a halt in the rest of the country".

In 1926, Moessel took advantage of his growing international reputation to come to the United States. He apparently gave his family and friends no indication of his plans to leave, but took the train into Munich, as if he were going to his office. Instead, he continued to Bremen and informed his wife of his intention to emigrate by writing to her from the ship.

The journey was not spur of the moment, however. Moessel came to America with the aid of Julius Rosenwald (1862–1932), the merchant-philanthropist and President of the Sears-Roebuck Company. The invitation to work in the United States, proffered in 1924, was for the purpose of decorating the proposed Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago. Rosenwald pledged \$3,000,000 for the institution, a sizeable sum in the 1920s. The Museum was never built, but Moessel used Rosenwald's contacts and worked for the next three years primarily in Detroit, but also in Chicago and St. Louis, Missouri. He collaborated with the prominent American architect Albert Kahn (1869–1942), who was to have been the architect of the proposed Museum of Science and Industry. Moessel's efforts were so successful that his financial situation became as sound as it had been in pre-War Germany. In fact, in 1928, he signalled his desire to remain in his successful new situation by becoming an American citizen.

Unfortunately, nothing remains of Moessel's early works. Most of the buildings in which he painted murals have been refurbished, and often the re-decorators did not keep records of the works they destroyed. One of the artist's last remaining architectural paintings was demolished about 1980, and the firm that obliterated a huge zodiac on the ceiling of the Hotel Jefferson (now the Jefferson Arms) in St. Louis – a painting similar to the one in the Stuttgart Opera House – even received an official commendation from the city for its new deed. What we know of Moessel's later works, we know from his easel paintings, which share motifs, ideas, and compositions with his lost large-scale commissions.

To protect his artistic inventions, Moessel often placed the distinctive copyright mark at the lower corner of his canvases. In actuality, he copyrighted very few of the motifs, but probably expected the symbol alone to deter plagiarists. Moessel did not say why he thought it necessary to protect his geometric and figurative motifs, but whatever the reason, he pretended to do so until the end of his career.

Moessel's newfound prosperity lasted only three years. In 1929, his fortune was entirely wiped out by the stock market crash that inaugurated the Great Depression. At this time, he settled permanently in Chicago, where a large percentage of the population were German-speaking first generation immigrants or descendants of Germans who came to the United States as early as the American Revolution in the eighteenth century and who mo-

ved west. Of the catastrophe of 1929, Moessel wrote that "as a true European I had invested everything I owned in the stock market. After that disaster I once asked my attorney how it was possible for the president of a great conglomerate simply to retire unmolested to private life when, with his false statements after the crash he had even deprived the remnants of my holdings of their value. The lawyer replied with a question: Do you know of a single institution that does not make untrue statements?" Moessel did not indicate who the conglomerate president was. In any case, Moessel remained distrustful of public institutions, and this attitude was often reflected in his paintings on the value of the United Nations, the terrors of nuclear war, and in an entire series of small easel paintings that take as their central character a bubble-headed figure with large, thick glasses, the "critic", who witnesses the bludgeoning, insulting, and tormenting of people or anthropomorphized animals without the slightest sign of protest or even concern.

Three years after the stock market debacle, and indeed, the years to the end of his life, were difficult for Moessel. He experienced a steady erosion in his fortune and a decline in his artistic reputation. The Crash left him without savings, and the Depression deprived him of further commissions to recoup his fortunes. With the death of Julius Rosenwald in 1932, he lost that generous philanthropist's patronage and encouragement. Despite ill fortune, his life was not entirely bleak or lacking in modest accomplishments.

Modest success as easel painter

In 1932, Moessel held a successful exhibition at the Lake Forest Academy in which he was "discovered" by Chicago art critics. He exhibited jungle paintings of tigers and other exotic animals, and in the December 5, 1932, Chicago Daily News, one of his works was photographed with an admiring young socialite looking on. However much local critics admired Moessel's gigantic compositions, his large works were essentially unsalable to private patrons or to public institutions, and the photograph indicates that he had already begun to scale down his compositions with an eye to selling to wealthy individuals.

In fact, 1934 was a banner year for the artist. He exhibited at the Chicago Art Institute's Annual Exhibit by Artists of Chicago and Vicinity, twice at the Chicago Galleries Association (an organization run for and by artists that sponsored regular exhibitions), and in the Century of Progress Exhibition in the Lord Nelson Room at the Drake Hotel. And despite his complaints, he received the enthusiastic support of two of Chicago's most influential art critics.

C. J. Bulliet (1883–1952) was the art and drama critic of the Chicago Evening Post from 1924 to 1932, and then the art, movie, and drama critic of the Chicago Daily News from 1932 to 1948. Bulliet was also the author of some dozen volumes on art and music, including *Apples and Madonnas* (1927), chosen at the time as the representative book on modern art for the library of the White House, and *The Story of Lent in Art Masterpieces* (1951), which illustrated and ranked one of Moessel's paintings with those of Raphael (1483–1520) and Michelangelo (1475–1564). The critic admired and respected Moessel as an artist and supported his ef-