FRITZ WILHELM WINOLD REISS (1886–1953)

Set of Drawings Illustrating Episodes from John Milton’s “Paradise Lost”
Executed 1920–45

EX COLL.: the artist; by gift to a student in the early 1940s; by descent, until the present

French modern art made a dramatic entrance into America in 1913 at the famous Armory Show in New York City. In that same year, German twentieth-century art also arrived, with no fanfare, in the person of Winold Reiss, who disembarked on October 29, 1913 from the S. S. Imperator. (The most accessible discussion of Reiss remains Jeffrey C. Stewart, To Color America: Portraits by Winold Reiss, exhib. cat. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 1989. A very useful overview of Reiss’s career is contained in The Journal of the Cincinnati Historical Society, Vol. 51 [Summer/Fall 1993], Number 23, Queen City Heritage: Cincinnati Union Terminal and the Artistry of Winold Reiss.) Reiss was already twenty-seven years old when he came to America, thoroughly educated in a rigorous and inclusive heritage of German art that reflected decades of central European modernism.

Reiss’s father, Fritz Reiss (1857–1914), had trained as a landscape painter and portraitist at the renowned academy in Düsseldorf. Working as an illustrator, and proficient in watercolor as well as oil, Fritz Reiss moved his family, in the 1899, to Freiburg, a small village in southwest Germany near
the Black Forest, so that he could paint honest portraits of local peasants. This choice reflected a prevailing spirit of romantic nationalism in the fine arts, architecture, and literature that was expressed in arts and crafts movements across Europe. Two of Fritz Reiss’s sons followed their father into art. Hans became a sculptor, emigrated to Sweden, and eventually joined his brother in America. Winold’s first art teacher was his father. In 1911, Reiss went to Munich where he studied with Franz von Stuck at the Academy of Fine Arts and with Julius Diez at the School of Applied Arts. Von Stuck was an influential art nouveau artist, designer, sculptor, and architect whose graphic style tended toward imaginative symbolism. Diez was master of mural painting who gained renown for his commercial poster designs executed in the Jugendstil manner. While Reiss absorbed stylistic influences from both of these men, perhaps the most lasting lesson was the freedom with which German fine artists crossed genres, working in the fine arts and the applied arts as circumstances warranted, without prejudice to their standing in either field. This permeable boundary, a characteristic of German arts and crafts practice, was also championed by John Ruskin and his follower, William Morris, in England. While his European versatility enabled Reiss to support his family in America, it ultimately hampered his full acceptance as a fine artist.

Reiss was proficient in graphics, fabric design, interior decoration, mural and poster art, as well as landscape and portrait painting. When he first arrived in America he established himself across a broad range of these interests, working in illustration, poster design, interior decoration, and as a teacher. His first major interior commission, the Busy Lady Bakery in New York City (Stewart, p. 30 illus.), strongly recalls the design work a decade earlier of Josef Hoffman in Vienna and Charles Rennie Mackintosh in Glasgow. While fellow German immigrants were among Reiss’s first commercial patrons, by 1915 he had been invited to lecture on the German poster at the Art Students
League in New York. Anti-German feeling stirred up by America’s entry into World War I derailed some of Reiss’s projects, but still, in 1914 and 1915, he designed covers for *Scribner’s* magazine.

None of this, however, was what had drawn Reiss to America. The story goes that he came to America to live out his childhood fantasies. Like many other German boys, Reiss had been captivated in his youth by tales of the American “wild west” widely circulated in the imaginative accounts of the German author Karl May. Reiss had also read, in translation, the works of James Fennimore Cooper. Numerous explanations can be put forth to explain Reiss’s emigration to America in 1913. The combined reasons must have been compelling enough to leave behind a pregnant wife (she and his son, Tjark, born in December 1913, joined him in America in 1914). These reasons included, no doubt, the war clouds over Europe, the increasing militarism of German society (Reiss’s brother, Hans, was a pacifist); and the large number of artists already working in Germany. Still, for Reiss, America meant the Indian.

In January 1920, Reiss realized his dream of traveling west to Indian country. He went with a student to the Blackfoot Reservation in Browning, Montana. Thus, began a relationship with Native Americans that lasted all of his life. Reiss produced thirty-six portraits of Blackfoot Indians in the winter of 1920. When he exhibited these in New York in 1920, at the E. F. Hanfstaengl Galleries, they were purchased as a group by Dr. Philip Cole, a native of Montana. In October 1920, Reiss made a sketching trip to Mexico, painting portraits and landscapes. As he traveled, Reiss’s style began to reflect the influence of the aesthetics, color palette, and patterns of native American visual culture. He blended this into his now hyphenated German-American vocabulary, reaching for an artistic language expressed in the most universally accessible terms that would convey the respect he
felt for all his subjects. The final major influence on Reiss’s style came in 1921, when, taking his eight-year-old son with him, he made his only return trip to Germany, where he visited his mother and sister. From September to the following May, Reiss traveled through Holland, Germany, Switzerland, Sweden, and Czechoslovakia. In Oberammergau he made nineteen portraits of actors in the passion plays. In Sweden he sketched country people; and in Germany, returning to his paternal roots, he drew thirty-eight Black Forest residents. As importantly, he visited Munich and Berlin and saw the work of the Neue Sachlichkeit (New Objectivity) artists, whose fidelity to life as it is seen and to the social conditions of the people confirmed him in his own objectivity. Stewart (p. 44) suggests that Reiss was also influenced by seeing the work of Max Beckmann (he later had a 1924 Beckmann monograph in his personal library). When Reiss returned to America he produced a series of “imaginatives”, composite images of New York (and sometimes specifically Harlem) nightlife that recall Beckmann’s style. Reiss’s work, however, steered clear of the anger and direct political engagement of the German artists. He found positive energy in his city scenes and high spiritual values in his pre-industrial, pre-capitalist peasants.

One of the most notable aspects of Reiss’s modernism, and a point on which he emphatically parted ways from artists who prized unintelligibility as proof of aesthetic virtue, was that for Reiss, his art could only be successful insofar as it found patrons to support it and a public to understand it. Reiss’s modern interiors were cheerful and welcoming; his portraits of marginalized populations—native Americans, Mexican peasants, and Negroes of the Harlem Renaissance as well as the offshore Georgia Sea Islands, invariably expressed the theme of a commonly shared human dignity.
In New York, Reiss managed twin pursuits, becoming an influential teacher while maintaining a separate studio practice for his own work. He designed many well-known and well loved commercial interiors, including, notably the chain of Longchamps restaurants in New York City and the splendid ballroom of the Hotel St. George in Brooklyn Heights. His Indian portrait work became part of the national visual culture when he acquired as a patron, Louis Hill, the owner of the Great Northern Railroad. In 1927, Hill purchased Reiss’s entire summer’s work, fifty-two portraits of American Indians. The relationship with the railroad proved long lasting and multi-faceted. The Great Northern used Reiss’s Indian portraits to illustrate months in its annual promotional calendars. Reiss’s designs also adorned the railroad’s menus, posters, and other promotional materials. Meanwhile he exhibited his work at the National Academy of Design, the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, and the Los Angeles Museum. In 1933, Reiss completed his designs for murals in the Cincinnati Union (Railroad) Terminal. These murals, threatened with destruction in 1972, were saved after a public hue and cry. Some remain in the former railroad station, now a cultural center, while others have been reinstalled at the Greater Cincinnati-Northern Kentucky International Airport, where they remain highly prized.

Reiss spent the early years of the Depression in New York, where because of his experience in creating public art, as well as his thriving art school, he fared better than many of his contemporaries. Reiss had moved his studio from 4 Christopher Street in Greenwich Village to a warehouse at 108 West 16th Street in late 1927, with Reiss remodeling the space to accommodate large skylights for natural light for the classrooms. Reiss’s school powered right past the crash and remained a vibrant center of artistic activity, serving as a gathering space for a variety of artists, dancers, and musicians.
The present series of drawings offer an intriguing glimpse into a little-known aspect of Winold Reiss’s career: the oeuvre that he produced for himself, without any immediate commercial purpose, because he was a creative artist who always kept working. Included in a group of drawings that Reiss gifted to a favorite student and sometime model in the early 1940s, they have descended since then in the family of the recipient. They are clearly part of the body of work Reiss called “fantasies” or “imaginatives,” personal expressions in the language of German symbolism that characterized the work of Reiss’s teacher, Franz von Stuck, combined with Reiss’s own idiosyncratic and selective adaptation of developments in contemporary art. While some of the group vary in size and the color of their background paper, eight of them appear to be illustrative of episodes in John Milton’s epic biblical poem, “Paradise Lost.” The names by which they are identified reflect research by Sean Rosenthal of Hirschl & Adler Galleries matching episodes in “Paradise Lost” to Reiss’s subject matter. These include “Adam and Eve in the Garden,” “Eve’s Awakening,” “The Endearment of Adam and Eve,” “Mutual Accusation,” “To Guilty Shame,” “God All-Seeing,” “Their Eyes How Opened,” and “Expulsion from the Garden.” All but the last of these are pastel and graphite on black paper, with a sight size of 12 x 9 in. They retain their original mats, which Reiss signed and inscribed with “opus” numbers. The exception is “Expulsion from the Garden,” which is a pastel on a larger (20 1/2 x 26 in.) black sheet of paper and unmatted.

On reflection, it seems appropriate that Reiss would have found inspiration in Milton’s poem, relating the story of Adam and Eve’s banishment from the Garden of Eden. Winold Reiss was a lifelong wanderer and seeker, never entirely at home in his native Germany, nor in his adopted home in America. Moreover, “Paradise Lost” had famously attracted the attention of William Blake (1757–1827), a profoundly romantic poet, painter, and printmaker who saw in Milton’s poem an opportunity
to express in his own terms, his vision of how humankind came to pursue its fraught sojourn through earthly life. Blake’s drawings are not accessories to Milton, but parallel works of art. Reiss, a twentieth century romantic pursuing a solo path through a welter of influences, schools and media, can be understood as a Blakean figure. These drawings are modern, enigmatic, and, for all that, deeply felt, elaborating on the biblical story of how we all find ourselves wanderers in search of an elusive home.

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