

Meyer Axelrod, Female Reclining Nude, 1959, watercolor and gouache on cardboard, 52.5 x 74 cm, signed and dated lower right, handwritten inscription in Belarusian on the reverse. Condition: Pinholes in the corners and edge damage, otherwise good.

The work was provided – in museum quality – with a new passe-partout (70 x 90 cm) of the company HALBE. A fitting frame – in museum quality – with museum glass (anti-reflective, very high UV protection, anti-static, abrasion resistant) of the company HALBE can be provided on request.

Meyer Moiseevich Axelrod (1902 Molodechno 1902 – 1970 Moscow) was a Belarusian painter, graphic artist, stage designer, and teacher of Jewish origin whose work only became known in the West after the collapse of the Iron Curtain. His artistic career gives an idea of the reprisals to which modern Jewish artists were subjected in the Soviet Union. His wife was the Jewish writer Rivka Rubina (1906–1987), his brother the poet Zelik Axelrod (1904–1941).

Born in Molodechno, just north of Minsk, the Axelrod family moved to Tambov in the Oka-Don basin, about 420 km southeast of Moscow, at the beginning of World War I, when all Jews were expelled from the frontline areas by the Russian authorities. It was there that he took his first drawing lessons. From 1918, he lived in Minsk and earned his living by making advertising posters for cinemas. From 1919 to 1920, he served in the Red Army and worked as a draftsman in the communications department of the Western Front.

In 1921, he participated in the 1st Minsk Art Exhibition, where he presented 25 of his works, which were well received. He received a recommendation from the People's Commissariat for Education of the BSSR to study in Moscow. There he studied at the graphic arts department of VKhUTEMAS under Vladimir Faworski, Konstantin Istomin, Sergei Gerasimov, and Alexander Radchenko. He then taught at the Moscow Higher Art and Technical Institute and the Textile Institute from 1928 to 1932. He was a member of the *Four Arts* group, which existed in Moscow and Leningrad from 1924 to 1931, and joined the Moscow Artists' Union in 1932. He designed stage sets for Jewish theaters in Minsk, Moscow, and Kiev. He frequently visited Minsk, where he made sketches of the city and its Jewish life.

In Minsk, he also established contacts with the Belarusian intelligentsia of his time, whom he often met at his brother Zelik's performances. Zelik Moiseevich Axelrod (1904–1941) was a formative figure in Belarusian-Jewish literature. After completing his studies, he returned to Minsk. He worked at the State Publishing House of the BSSR and, from 1931, was managing director of the Jewish magazine *Biatostock Star*. In his short life, he published four volumes of poetry, the first in 1922. In his poems, he praised the socialist upheavals in the country and the friendship of the Soviet peoples. He wrote in Yiddish and also translated Belarusian and Russian classics into Yiddish. He was married to Pearl Weissenberg, the daughter of the well-known Jewish writer Isaac Meir Weissenberg (1878–1938). After he sharply contradicted the anti-Semitic remarks of Mikhas Lynkov (1899–1975), chairman of the Belarusian Writers' Union, at an event in 1941, he was arrested shortly thereafter on the pretext of belonging to a "nationalist writers' organization." During the Red Army's retreat from Minsk, the political prisoners, including Zelik Axelrod, were taken to a forest and shot. The family did not learn of this until years later.

During one of his brother's performances, Meyer Axelrod met his future wife, the Jewish writer Rivka Rubina (1906–1987). In 1930/31, he visited the agricultural commune *Voyo Nova* in Crimea twice, which had been founded by Jews who had returned from Palestine. His observations and sketches in the commune had a significant influence on his later work. From 1931 onwards, however, like many other famous artists in the Soviet Union, he became the target of the campaign against formalism. He was persecuted in the Soviet press for pessimism, sketchiness, distortions, incompleteness, expressionism, and even for an alleged artistic affinity with the Italian-Jewish painter Amedeo Modigliani (1884–1920). He was forced to turn more to book illustration and theater work.

In 1941, the Axelrod family was evacuated to Tambov, where they had already stayed during World War I. Meyer Axelrod himself remained in Moscow to find out more about the fate of his arrested brother and to await his conscription into the military. Shortly after mobilization, however, he was called back by Sergei Eisenstein (1898–1948) to work on the film set of *Ivan the Terrible* in Alma-Ata. On the way there, he picked up his family from Tambov. From 1941 to 1943, he lived in Alma-Ata, where he supported Jewish refugees from Poland. In 1944, an Axelrod exhibition was held in Alma-Ata.

After the war, he took part in a group exhibition on the Kowalew Bridge in Moscow in 1966, where around 250 paintings were shown. Following the exhibition, he was immediately admitted to hospital due to heart disease. In 1968, a solo exhibition took place in Rostov-on-Don. Axelrod died in 1970 of an undiagnosed heart attack and did not live to see the publication of the exhibition catalog. He is buried in the Jewish section of the Vostrokowski Cemetery in Moscow.

Axelrod's works only became known in the West after the fall of the Iron Curtain. Posthumous exhibitions were held in Moscow, New York, London, Germany, and Israel in the 1990s and 2000s. Today, his works can be found in the collections of the Tretyakov Gallery, the Russian Museum, and the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow, among others.