

## Joseph Friebert: Through the Years, 1945 – 2000

Cedarburg Art Museum is fortunate to be the beneficiary of the Joseph and Betsy Ritz Friebert Family Partnership and Kohler Foundation, Inc. gift of Joseph Friebert artwork. Nine paintings and two lithographs were carefully chosen by two museum representatives to depict the variety in subject matter and changes over the decades of the artist who lived most all his life in Milwaukee.

Born in 1908 in Buffalo, New York, and brought to Wisconsin in 1911, Joseph Friebert grew up in a Jewish working-class family in Milwaukee.<sup>1</sup> His socialist father worked as a tailor and union organizer.<sup>2</sup> With this upbringing, Friebert was destined to reflect the human condition so altered by social and economic concerns made potent by wars and the Great Depression.



Above: *Self-portrait*, 1939, 19 ¼ x 16 ¼ inches. Spencer Museum of Art Collection, Gift of the Joseph and Betsy Ritz Friebert Family Partnership and Kohler Foundation, Inc.

Friebert first worked as a pharmacist at the Oriental Pharmacy in Milwaukee for a number of years. His work was reduced to part-time in the Great Depression, so in 1932, Friebert followed a favorite hobby and joined the Men's Sketch Club and had his first leanings toward an art career.



*Refugees*, oil on Masonite, 1945, 11 5/8 x 19 ½ inches. Cedarburg Art Museum Collection, Gift of the Joseph and Betsy Ritz Friebert Family Partnership and Kohler Foundation, Inc.

With encouragement from his peers, he attended Layton

School of Art classes in evenings, studying under Gerrit V. Sinclair.<sup>3</sup> Encouraged by artist Betsy Ritz whom he met in the mid 1930s and married in 1937, Friebert entered Milwaukee State Teachers College in 1941 in order to pursue a career in art. He studied there under Robert von Neumann, receiving his degree in art education in 1945. That same year he quit his job at the pharmacy and began a short stint teaching at the Layton School of Art. But by 1946 Friebert joined the faculty of his *alma mater* (MSTC – later known as the UW-

Milwaukee) and in 1951 received his MA from UW-Madison. After 30 years of teaching at UW-M, Joseph Friebert retired in 1976, only to continue a prolific output of artwork.<sup>4</sup>

Friebert worked as both a printmaker and painter. Drawing was a critical component to Friebert's art, integral to all his subjects depicted through the years till his death at age 94 in 2002. He often depicted urban life, Wisconsin landscape, female nudes, social injustice, labor, and the human condition with a strong focus on isolation.<sup>5</sup> While his subject matter varied, Friebert always strived to paint how he felt about himself, not how he felt about the subject of his work.<sup>6</sup> His interest in the human condition was not only encouraged by his familial background, but he also seems to have been influenced by Degas, Picasso, and German Expressionists according to art critic Dean Jensen.<sup>7</sup>

Friebert was influenced by a variety of movements and individual artists for his artistic style. Because of his interests in subject matter, Friebert mostly worked as a realist, but from time to time he did

work in a cubic manner. In either manner, Friebert was concerned with an object's abstract qualities such as structure, mass, and color. In this respect, he learned from the post-World War II American abstract-expressionists such as Willem DeKooning and Franz Kline.<sup>8</sup> He was influenced by his friends, Robert Schellin, Alfred Sessler, Santos Zingale, and Robert von Neumann. He was also inspired by Honoré Daumier, Francisco Goya, and Mexican muralists, all who offered commentary on social and political life in their art.<sup>9</sup>



*Viaduct*, oil, 1958, 24 x 48 inches. Cedarburg Art Museum Collection, Gift of the Joseph and Betsy Ritz Friebert Family Partnership and Kohler Foundation,

Unlike many of his contemporaries, either realist or abstractionist, Friebert's technique in painting reflected the influence of Rembrandt and other Dutch artists due



*Green River*, oil, 1970, 36 x 30 inches. Cedarburg Art Museum Collection, Gift of the Joseph and Betsy Ritz Friebert Family Partnership and Kohler Foundation, Inc.

to his process of underpainting and use of glazes to create depth. He used those Old Master techniques to perfect what he claimed was a "dark and luminous surface" for which he was well known.<sup>10</sup>

Friebert's work was exhibited widely in his lifetime with exhibitions at the Art Institute of Chicago, Whitney Museum of American Art, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Boston Museum of Fine Arts, and in the American Pavilion of the 1956 Venice Biennale, among others.<sup>11</sup> In 2009, Friebert received the Wisconsin Visual Art Lifetime Achievement Award posthumously. His work can be seen in many public collections in Wisconsin and across the nation, in part thanks to the Joseph and Betsy Ritz Friebert Family Partnership and Kohler Foundation, Inc. distributing approximately 350 of the artist's works to various museums in the state and nation.<sup>12</sup>

*-research and text by Samantha Landre and Mary Chemotti, 2017*

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Joseph Lofton, "Joseph Friebert & Betsy Ritz: Beginnings – Works on Paper of the 1930s" (Milwaukee: Charles Allis Art Museum, 1984).

<sup>2</sup> James Auer, "Beautiful Spirits Helped Guide His Brush," *Milwaukee Journal* (Milwaukee, WI), March 6, 1977.

<sup>3</sup> Lofton.

<sup>4</sup> Susan Friebert Rossen, "An Artful Marriage: Works on Paper by Joseph Friebert and Betsy Ritz Friebert," (Milwaukee: University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Auer.

<sup>7</sup> Dean Jensen, "Joseph Friebert at top of his form," *Milwaukee Sentinel* (Milwaukee, WI), Sept. 25, 1981.

<sup>8</sup> Auer.

<sup>9</sup> Lofton.

<sup>10</sup> Auer.

<sup>11</sup> Curtis L. Carter & Johann J.K. Reusch, "Wisconsin Artists: A Celebration of Jewish Presence," (Milwaukee: Haggerty Museum of Art gallery guide, 1994).

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.kohlerfoundation.org/preservation/major-collections/joseph-friebert/> accessed August 20, 2017.