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Fort Lauderdale Museum exhibits on Cobra, Vishniac deserve a visit

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Steven Brooke / For the Museum of Art Fort Lauderdale

"Spirit of Cobra" exhibit at the Museum of Art | Fort Lauderdale, Nova Southeastern University, through May 18, 2014.

Many art enthusiasts are unfamiliar with the Cobra art movement, and understandably so. It lasted only a brief moment in Europe after World War II, from 1948 to 1951, and was formed by a group of artists from cities whose initials created the acronym: Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam. Cobra remained relatively obscure in the United States, but its influence was wide-spread and continues to this day.

South Floridians can learn more at the Spirit of Cobra exhibition at the NSU Museum of Art Fort Lauderdale (MOA), the first in a trilogy of shows over the next several years exploring the origins, impact and after-effects of these avant garde artists and thinkers who sought a new path in the wake of the physical and cultural rubble of Europe.

Despite the movement's relative obscurity, this is a rich, full show of numerous paintings, drawings, sculptures, sketchbooks, even documentary photographs, stretching in time from the pre-Cobra to post-Cobra eras. Some artists names might ring familiar, such as Dutchman Karel Appel or the Dane Asger Jorn. But for the most part, these artists didn't become household names in America, which is why wandering around the totality of the show, without trying to find a famous gem, is what leaves the most indelible impression. Some works fall flat, and the sheer number of pieces on display can make a visit daunting.

South Florida has always been lacking in historical surveys, which serve an educational purpose that many of our institutions and schools are not equipped yet to deliver. MOA, however, has the largest collection of Cobra art in the United States, and this exhibition is the first in collaboration with Europe's biggest collection, the Cobra Museum of Modern Art in the Netherlands. Private works were also loaned to complement this extensive review.

What may come as a surprise is the amount of child-like, intentionally naïve and colorful canvases. One might imagine that artwork made directly after this cataclysmicly

destructive war by citizens that lived in the very center of it would be dark and harsh, similar to artworks from post World War I. But this is where the backbone of the Cobra movement becomes clear. These artists wanted to look forward to a more optimistic, communal world, one that combined primitive and mythical histories devoid of modern European cynicism.

While many of the paintings border on abstract, they don't become too cold or removed from emotion. The Cobra artists wanted to get away from what they would call "bourgeois confines and severe dogmas'' in favor of a more spontaneous creative process that would be accessible to the average viewer.

That includes children. One room is dedicated to Cobra artist children's books, as well as work from kids; it's a generally chipper room. One splendid vertical oil work from Appel is called Child Sun and Birds. The 1950 piece reflects the intense interest in reclaiming a more innocent time, which in a universal sense resides in youth. The bright yellow and oranges in the painting reinforce the notion that this could be created by a child, with it's almost stick-like figures with block heads and straight lines indicating mouths and eyes.

But that is not to say these are superficial pieces in the exhibit. There is darkness here. Just as in fairy tales, something amiss seems to be lurking still. Because of the artists' ethnic backgrounds, Scandinavian mythology plays a role in much of the artwork; Thor's thunderbolts and the Norse goddesses wolf-cries are not exactly indicative of endless paradise. In a number of paintings and drawings, not so benign-looking elf-like creatures stare out at you.

One superb painting from Henry Heerup from 1948 titled Little Conductor is downright creepy. In it, a boy lords over the orchestra and audience holding a baton that resembles a knife, while a blue tea-pot with disturbing facial features leers up at him. The innocence here quickly fades, as it did under the real Little Dictator. In a Carl-Henning Pedersen work from 1941, the artist chose watercolors and crayons to make his bright, child-like simplistic drawing. But here again, the image itself is darkly themed, as a dinosaur head descending from the sky is readying to chomp on his pink prey.

This tension between a desire to return to simple roots and an acknowledgment of a more complex human reality guides many of the artworks. Many of the artists were fascinated by native ritualistic objects such as masks, musical instruments and totems, so there are examples of them scattered throughout the exhibit, along with 20th century Cobra versions of such objects. One nice example is a small, sand-colored stone sculpture of a snake from Heerup, from 1950, with just several dabs of paint indicating an eye and mouth.

The members disbanded Cobra only a handful of years after founding it, to retain its fluid transitionary vision and avoid becoming a formalized movement with rigid confines. Some, such as Karel Appel, would move to the new center of the art world, New York, where a vibrant Abstract Expressionism was taking hold. Others remained in Europe and developed under mid-Century European traditions. Regardless of where the Cobra artists went, their influence on contemporary art is easily seen in loose brush strokes, unconventional materials and multi-cultural influences — a spontaneous sense of

expression after war by a rigid regime.

LAST CHANCE TO SEE ROMAN VISHNIAC

Taking over another huge section of MOA are the hundreds of photographs of Roman Vishniac, which also were made in the pre-and post-World War II era in Europe but are entirely different in their historical narrative. Vishniac was a Russian Jew who immigrated to the vibrant metropolis of Berlin in the 1920s, where he developed a distinctive photographic technique and framing composition.

Some of the early images depict middle-class Jewish life in Berlin, of people rushing to work in bustling train stations, or walking home from a night at the cinema. Often, the shadows in these black-and-whites dominate the scene. One shot of men walking at different angles, long shadows cast by the light pouring in to the Anhalter Bahnhof railway terminus, is simply a gorgeous portrayal reminiscent of a still from a 1930s movie.

But Vishniac's camera also started to catch the more disturbing movements of men as time went on. Anti-Semitic graffiti and Nazi posters begin popping up on the walls behind his subjects, and an ominous aura increasingly emanates from the imagery.

Vishniac then pointed his lens further east, in photographs for which he would become most famous. Jewish life in the small villages of Poland and the rest of Eastern Europe was a far cry from well-to-do Berlin. Life, Vishniac graphically records, was desperately poor and grim. Working men here didn't wear top hats or run to the train, they slept on train benches as they had no homes. In the end it didn't much matter which side of the east-west divide one was on; once the Nazis took over Jewish life virtually ceased to exist.

In some of the brighter and more optimistic photos, Visniac showed that Jewish life in general did of course not die out. He focused on some relatively obscure moments in historical terms, in Zionist training camps that arose in Europe just before the war, such as the series displayed here that was shot in the Netherlands. He visited displaced person camps right after the war, and finally depicted a people putting their lives back together in New York City. Some aspects of life returned to a kind of pre-war normalcy, as in the scene of dozens of businessmen eating and reading Yiddish newspapers in Hirsch's Deli on West 35th Street.

That Vishniac's camera caught so much is impressive itself, but that he was also an accomplished photographer as well makes this such a compelling visit. In the hands of a lesser talent, the shear amount of photography could become numbing and generic if they weren't expertly composed.