

# EGILL JACOBSEN

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*Egill Jacobsen was one of the pioneers of a form of Danish abstract expressionism that was later to result in the international artists' movement known as Cobra, founded in Paris in 1948. The name is derived from the first letters of the three capital cities, Copenhagen, Brussels, and Amsterdam. The Cobra painters expressed themselves in a spontaneous and violent idiom adorned with monsters, masks, and birdlike creatures inspired by children's drawings, folk art, and the art of the South Seas. One of the main figures in the association was another Danish painter, Asger Jorn (1914–1973).*

*Jacobsen makes use of an artistic mask idiom that is clear, logical, lyrical, and often pervaded by a strangely gentle tone that is entirely his own.*

*His father, who occupied a modest position as a copyist, spent much of his free time painting copies from reproductions. His pictures were fairly inept, but they embodied an unconditional respect for art that made its mark on his son.*

*This son became apprenticed as a tailor, but he abandoned the trade and after a period at Carl Schwenn's school of painting was admitted to the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts. He stayed there for only about a year, as he felt that the institution could not teach him anything. Egill Jacobsen's work first appeared in the Kunstnernes Efterårsudstilling in 1932, and in countless exhibitions throughout his life, the most important of which were artists' associations: Linien 1937, Corner & Høst 1938–1941, Grønningen, from 1944 with a few breaks until 1958, then again from 1985 to 1995. His work also appeared in a large number of both group and solo exhibitions in museums and galleries at home and abroad. These include the Venice Biennale in 1956 and 1964 and the São Paulo Biennale in 1985.*

*Egill Jacobsen's early pictures were small, naturalistic motifs from the outer districts of Copenhagen, painted with broad strokes in dark colors. Jacobsen himself relates that the Danish Golden Age painters played an important part in his artistic career.*

*Of lasting importance to Egill Jacobsen's development toward an abstract idiom was a visit to Paris in 1934 and, after his return, contact with such artists as Ejler Bille (1910–2004), who was then mainly a sculptor, the painter Richard Mortensen (1910–1993), who later became taken by concrete abstract art, and the surrealist Vilhelm Bjerke Petersen (1909–1957).*

*Among the works Jacobsen saw in Paris were pictures by Picasso (1881–1973), Matisse (1869–1954), Braque (1882–1963), Max Ernst (1891–1976), and Miró (1893–1983), and he also visited the ethnographic collections in the Musée de l'Homme, where the obvious connection between modern art and primitive non-European art fascinated him.*

*Egill Jacobsen and his friends subsequently made the acquaintance of the psychologist Dr. Sigurd Næsgaard (1883–1956), and for a time Jacobsen attended his lectures on psychology, psychoanalysis, and the importance of the subconscious in relation to the abstract idiom in art.*

*In 1938 Egill Jacobsen painted Ophobning (Accumulation), now in Statens Museum for Kunst,*

which was to be of great importance to the group of artists of which he was one—Bille, Mortensen, and Petersen. The background of the work was Hitler's expansion into Czechoslovakia, a clear forewarning of the coming world war. The picture is executed in a nonfigurative, spontaneous manner of painting. Strong, aggressive colors and shapes and powerful black figurations in strange disharmonious rhythms overwhelm the viewer with waves of despondency and desperation. The work became a precursor of the postwar Cobra movement.

Soon afterward, Egill Jacobsen's paintings reflected completely different moods. They could still be characterized by forceful utterances of temperament, but gradually a lyrical element, often inspired by experiences in nature, came to constitute the fundamental tone in his painting. From 1941 to 1944, Jacobsen collaborated with the other spontaneous-abstract artists in publishing the periodical *Helhesten*, the major inspiration for which came especially from Asger Jorn. The mask form combined with all kinds of floating triangles, leaning verticals, graceful curves, and an array of indefinable squiggle-like dots and lines gradually came to represent the dominant structure in Egill Jacobsen's idiom, where color became the principal player and the invisible world of the mind the actual motif. As time passed, Egill Jacobsen's art adopted brighter colors and a lighter, more sketchlike form, as is exemplified by the two works in the Loeb collection.

He became a professor in the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in 1958, the first abstract painter ever to be appointed, where he taught until 1973; he then became an honorary member of the academy. He received various marks of distinction, such as the Eckersberg Medal in 1959, the Thorvaldsen Medal in 1969, and the Prince Eugen Medal in 1984. In addition, he executed several large-scale paintings to decorate public buildings such as Hvidovre Town Hall and Aarhus University.

S.L.

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