

Fiske ved gjeldens hav (Fishing in the Sea of Debt), 1933
Tapestry woven in wool and linen,
145 x 185 cm

The great economic crisis that characterized the early 1930s also struck Scandinavia. Industrial production fell, and unemployment figures rose dramatically. In Norway, the worst year of the crisis was 1933. Many were devastated by overwhelming debt, and the many fishermen in Ørlandet, where Hannah and Hans Ryggen lived, were among the hardest hit. That same year, Ryggen wove *Fishing in the Sea of Debt*. The tapestry depicts the banks' debt collectors fishing in the bloody waters of financial ruin. A boat has just capsized, and three adults and two children are floating in the sea. One of the men is struggling to keep the two small children's heads above water, while the woman to the right has already drowned; her body is sinking to the bottom. The woman's chickens, her only source of income, have been sold to meet interest payments. The man to her left has his mouth

and nose barely above the surface of the water. The fish depicted in front of him can no longer provide him with enough income to support himself. On land, a man lies dead on the ground. A doctor attending to his body greedily snatches one last coin. To the left, the banking commissioner's wife sits at an amply laden table observing the scene, seemingly unmoved by the tragedy that is unfolding in front of her.

In *Fishing in the Sea of Debt*, Ryggen revives the mediaeval way of composing in color fields, while also drawing on modernist painting and her own skills as a painter. She also, in her characteristic and expressionistic way, includes aspects of her private life in her treatment of public issues. Ryggen had personally experienced having the last of her egg money taken by the mortgage commissioner, so she knew what it felt like to be burdened by debt.





Vi og våre dyr (Us and Our Animals), 1934
Tapestry woven in wool and linen, 187.5 × 491 cm



The Industrial Revolution had enormous consequences for both urban development and living conditions, and it fundamentally altered the way human beings related to nature and the production of objects. When Hannah Ryggen wove *Fiske ved gjeldens hav (Fishing in the Sea of Debt)* in 1933, in solidarity with debt-laden workers, it was an overt political act. The following year she wove the monumental *Us and Our Animals*, which portrays the Ryggen family on their farm with their animals.

Ryggen was very fond of the animals and considered them part of the family. She was in torment whenever one of them had to be slaughtered, as we see depicted in the middle section, where a headless goose wanders aimlessly in front of the dinner table. Both *Fishing in the Sea of Debt* and *Us and Our Animals* are experience-based works. The former is explicitly political, but *Us and Our Animals* also conveys a political message, albeit somewhat less emphatically: By thematizing the core conditions of the

family, the work questions a fundamental aspect of humanity's existence: namely, our relationship to nature and how to subsist from it without doing harm. Hannah Ryggen's respect for and love of nature was all-encompassing. Today, the self-sustainability of nature's ecosystems is under massive attack, and the precarious situation has sparked renewed interest in the eco-philosophical themes and ideas behind *Us and Our Animals*.



Drømmedød (Death of Dreams), 1936
Tapestry woven in wool and linen,
235 × 273 cm

The motivation for *Death of Dreams* was the case of Carl von Ossietzky, a German writer and pacifist. As international affairs editor for the newspaper *Berliner Volks-Zeitung*, Ossietzky disclosed the German military's plans for a coup at the beginning of the 1920s. In 1931, by which time he had become editor of *Die Weltbühne*, Ossietzky was indicted on charges of treason and espionage, and sentenced to eighteen months in prison for his disclosure of Germany's re-armament efforts, a breach of the Treaty of Versailles. He was arrested again on charges of treason the day after the Reichstag fire in Berlin in 1933 and died in prison in 1938, the same year as Liselotte Herrmann (whom Ryggen also portrayed, see pp. 40/41). Ossietzky was a polarizing political symbol in Norway. Ryggen completed *Death of Dreams* in May 1936. It was exhibited soon thereafter and caused a sensation. This was a period during which cultural statements were largely judged according to political orientation. The tapestry was both a commentary in the context of the ongoing debate and a personal opinion about how the world would look under Nazi control. Ryggen wrote: "Woven in the year 1936, three years after Hitler came to power. I called it 'Death of Dreams' because now all dreams would die."¹

Ossietzky is behind bars, handcuffed. To his right, Joseph Goebbels, Hermann Göring, and Adolf Hitler form a triumvirate, supported by swastikas. Their faces and hands are woven in an intense shade of purple with traces of crimson. Goebbels clasps his hands around the throat of a prisoner who hangs helplessly in his grip. On the right is another group, this one behind bars. The main person here is Albert Einstein, standing with a violin in his hand. Einstein was a prominent opponent of the Third Reich, and as early as 1933 he renounced his German citizenship in protest against the Nazis' persecution of the Jews. In front of this group the bars of the cell are broken in places. The area below the figures is restricted to two main colors: brown and gray. The ornamentation, with its seemingly neutral yet highly disciplined and repetitive geometric forms, is extremely effective. Swastikas emerge and dissolve, depending on whether one looks at the light gray or the brown. The legs and feet of the lifeless prisoner in Goebbels' clutch hang over the lower field, and the gray prison uniform melds with the gray of the ornamentation.

¹ Exhibition card written by Hannah Ryggen in 1946. Archives of Designmuseet, Copenhagen.





Liselotte Herrmann halshuggen
(*Liselotte Herrmann Decapitated*),
1938
Tapestry woven in wool and linen,
187.1×154 cm

Liselotte Herrmann was politically active in the Red Student League (Roter Studentenbund) and was a member of the Communist Party (KPD) in Germany. In 1933 she signed a manifesto 'Defence of Democratic Rights and Freedoms,' and as a result was expelled from university. In 1934 she gave birth to a son, Walter. She continued to work illegally against the Nazis, and on December 7, 1935, she was arrested for treason. Despite being tortured, Herrmann disclosed no information and was classified as *Unverbesserliche* (incorrigible).

In Ryggen's tapestry we see Herrmann seated with her child on her lap in an idyllic garden-like setting. The way in which she is holding the child is almost identical to her pose in a

photograph printed in the Norwegian newspaper *Dagbladet* on March 5, 1938. Yet the path from happiness to imprisonment was very short, visualized by a single footprint in the direction of the cell. She was imprisoned for nineteen months before her case was heard by a so-called People's Court (*Volksgerechtshof*), during which time her son Walter lived with his grandparents. In 1937 Herrmann was sentenced to death. When she asked to say goodbye to her son, her request was refused; instead, according to the newspapers, the prison guards threw Walter's clothes into her cell. Despite intense international protest Liselotte Herrmann was guillotined on June 20, 1938.

In this tapestry, the tragedy unfolds in succession, as in folk art weavings,

early Christian decorative traditions, or the more modern photo reportage from this time. The subject is clearly inspired by the classical motif of the Madonna in the rose garden. The development of events can be read in a progression that moves from left to right, and from top to bottom: first the scene with mother and child, then the red-hued executioner in the upper right corner, to the blood-red footprint in the lower part of the weaving, and lastly to the prison cell where Herrmann clasps baby clothes spun from soft *geiteragg*, a goat fibre Ryggen had not used before, nor would again. The cruciform structure provides a taut composition that functions extremely well against the rich coloration.



Lise Lottte Hermann Holshuggen 1938



6. oktober 1942 (6 October 1942), 1943
Tapestry woven in wool and linen,
175 x 419.5 cm



When Norway was occupied by the Nazis in April 1940, Ørlandet, the region where the Ryggens lived, was chosen as the location for a new airstrip and base. Large tracts of agricultural land were destroyed, while at the same time the local population increased dramatically due to both the military facilities and the large prison camps established there. The Ryggen family witnessed a great deal of suffering.

In 6 October 1942 we see how Hannah Ryggen is able to organize a variety of events, references, and inner images within a single composition. To the left, tragedy takes place as if on a stage. The actor, theater director, and resistance member Henry Gleditsch, in costume for the role of Doctor Relling in Ibsen's *Vildanden* (*The Wild Duck*), lies in his wife's arms after being shot. Gleditsch was among those singled out by Reich Commissioner Josef Terboven for execution as "propitiatory sacrifices," and his execution took place the day before the premiere of the play. Synnøve Gleditsch, also an actor in the play and depicted in costume, kneels by her husband's side. Their positions are evocative of a pietà, and the reference is intensified by the presence of a naked man bound to a post behind them. The man is not a Christ figure, however, but a Serbian prisoner of war whom Ryggen personally witnessed being tortured and executed at one of the concentration

camps. Above them, Hitler, with a pistol in each hand, floats like an omnipresent devil. The shots he fires strike Gleditsch. Ryggen ridicules Hitler by depicting him with oak leaves issuing from his anus. She also denigrates the Norwegian writer Knut Hamsun, a Nazi sympathizer, and the Norwegian Prime Minister Vidkun Quisling, set up by the German occupiers, who are portrayed as pitiful black birds.

The scene to the right expresses the Ryggen family's desire to flee. They are sitting in a boat that is as black as death but surrounded by red roses. Three sinister crimson heads float above them. The face in the middle bears a strong likeness to Terboven's, and the one to the right resembles Jonas Lie, the Norwegian chief of police under Terboven who authorized death sentences against Norwegians during the war. The face to the left could be the SS officer Gerhard Flesch. This trio echoes that of Hitler, Göring, and Goebbels in *Drømmedød* (*Death of Dreams*, pp. 38/39).

The tapestry's mid-section was the last to be woven, as is noticeable from a purely compositional perspective. Ryggen felt that a measure of red was called for to balance the sections on the left and right. Thus, in the middle panel, a stalwart Winston Churchill stands guard over his country in an orange-red fortress tower.

