

## The Menil Collection to Present *Si Lewen: The Parade* at the Menil Drawing Institute in April 2023

*Museum's exhibition is the first in the United States to bring together the complete set of original works by artist Si Lewen*



HOUSTON—November 15, 2022—The Menil Collection is proud to announce an exhibition of drawings by Polish-born American artist Si Lewen (1918-2016), made in preparation for his groundbreaking graphic novel about the never-ending cycle of war, *The Parade* (1957). All fifty-five original drawings reproduced in the book will be exhibited, along with eight additional related works. The complete set has never before been exhibited in the United States. *Si Lewen: The Parade* will be **on view at the Menil Drawing Institute from April 21–September 3, 2023.**

Without a single written word, *The Parade* tells the story of events that the artist experienced firsthand: armistice parades after World War I, the rise of Nazism, World War II, the Holocaust, and finally, post war celebrations. More broadly, the drawings speak to the cycle of war, the seductive glory and pomp, followed by soldier enlistment, community deprivation, devastating destruction, death, and heartbreak. When the war ends, the cycle repeats.

*The Parade* begins with images of children and families making their way towards a celebration. After watching a military parade, children wearing paper hats pretend to fight one another. All too soon, they are given deadly weapons, and what once seemed like lighthearted fun morphs

into a nightmare. The drawings represent devastation, desolation, and death. Menacing shadows and a dark, ominous tone convey the shock and horror of war. The series unfolds cinematically, sequentially connecting one image to another to create a powerfully moving work of art.

Rebecca Rabinow, Director, The Menil Collection, said, “Si Lewen’s unsparing narrative captures the cycles of rhetoric and militarism that first produce excitement and pride before giving way to terror and destruction. *The Parade* is both a visual documentation of the political upheaval that led to the Holocaust, and also a nuanced articulation of the cycles of violence that have existed for millennia.”

Each drawing is a technical tour de force of mark-making, combining line and incisions into the surface of the illustration board. Lewen used a limited tonal range, illustrating his darkest moments of war in which all color seemed to have vanished. In the July 2005 *ART TIMES* article “The Artist and War,” Lewen said, “The sky, which a moment ago was blue, appeared washed out into a bony whiteness and all else appeared as an almost monochrome range between black and white. Even the color of blood was not red but black.” The exclusion of color further emphasizes this bleak, harrowing time in the artist’s life, and in world history, as depicted in *The Parade*.

Kelly Montana, Assistant Curator, Menil Drawing Institute, said, “*Si Lewen: The Parade* illustrates the destruction and despair surrounding World War II in Europe as authoritarian violence builds and lives are lost. Inspired by the traditions of visual narrative by artists like Frans Masereel, Lewen created a deeply affecting set of works that powerfully engages its audience frame by frame.”

A Polish Jewish refugee, Si Lewen grew up in Germany, where he observed the political and cultural upheaval happening around him. In 1933, when Hitler came to power, he fled to France with his brother and later immigrated to the United States, enlisting in the U.S. Army and joining an elite unit of German-speaking special forces called “The Ritchie Boys.” He saw action in Normandy and visited the Buchenwald concentration camp shortly after its liberation in 1945; he was devastated by atrocities of the Holocaust.

After returning to America, Lewen resumed his art in an effort to heal from his trauma. Completed around 1950 and published in 1957, *The Parade* was the culmination of this phase of his work. Although Lewen transformed his personal memories into these drawings, he knew they could not express the real-life terrors he witnessed. Lewen said, “Did I succeed? Can others now see what I saw? The answer is ‘no’. No matter how well articulated or skillfully created, ‘horror’, for instance, means little except to those who have also experienced it.” The book, which today is little remembered, received numerous accolades when it was published. Through his gallerist Lotte Jacobi, Lewen sent an early mock-up of *The Parade* to Albert Einstein shortly after it was completed. Einstein wrote to Lewen, “I find your work, *The Parade*, very impressive from a purely artistic standpoint... It has often been said that art should not be used to serve any political or otherwise practical goals. But I could never agree with this point of view... Our time needs you and your work!”

*Si Lewen: The Parade* is organized by Kelly Montana, Assistant Curator at the Menil Drawing Institute.

### **About the Menil Collection**

Houston philanthropists and art patrons John and Dominique de Menil established the Menil Foundation in 1954 to cultivate greater public understanding and appreciation of art, architecture, culture, religion, and philosophy. In 1987, the Menil Collection's main museum building opened to the public. Today, the Menil Collection consists of a group of five art buildings and green spaces located within a residential neighborhood. The Menil remains committed to its founders' belief that art is essential to human experience and fosters direct personal encounters with works of art. The museum welcomes all visitors free of charge to its buildings and surrounding green spaces. [menil.org](http://menil.org)

### **About the Menil Drawing Institute**

The Menil Drawing Institute was established in 2008 in recognition of drawing's centrality in the lives of artists and its crucial role in modern and contemporary artistic culture. The Drawing Institute has since developed an international profile for exhibitions, scholarship, and collaboration. In 2018, a dedicated building for the Menil Drawing Institute, designed by Johnston Marklee, was inaugurated. It is now the site of regular drawings exhibitions, an annual monumental wall drawing commission, public programs, and study. [menil.org/drawing-institute](http://menil.org/drawing-institute)

### **Funding**

This exhibition is generously supported by Morris A. Weiner; Rice University's Boniuk Institute for Religious Tolerance; Barbara and Michael Gamson; Heidi and David Gerger; Caroline Huber; Lois and George Stark; and the City of Houston through Houston Arts Alliance.

### **Images Caption**

Untitled drawing from Si Lewen, *The Parade*, ca. 1950. Charcoal, crayon, and tusche on gessoed board, sheet: 12 × 18 inches (30.5 × 45.7 cm). Collection of the International Institute for Restorative Practices. © International Institute for Restorative Practices

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