

# ROOTS OF CREATIVITY



*Landscapes by Hans Friedrich Grohs*



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LORA ROBINS GALLERY OF DESIGN FROM NATURE  
UNIVERSITY OF RICHMOND MUSEUMS

## INTRODUCTION

Throughout his life, German artist Hans Friedrich Grohs (1892-1981) found inspiration, solace, and spirituality in the landscape, from his birthplace in the coastal province of Dithmarschen, Germany, to the majestic Italian Alps, to the Arctic islands of Lofoten in northern Norway. This exhibition of more than 35 drawings and watercolors from the 1960s reveals the artist's personal response to nature that grew from his early training at the Bauhaus into his primary subject matter towards the end of his career.

As a young master student at the Bauhaus in Weimar, Grohs studied under Lyonel Feininger, but he left the academy in 1919 following a controversial dispute with founder Walter Gropius regarding the sacrifice of German "identity" for the increasing internationalism of the institution's mission. Despite his allegiance to Germanic themes, in 1937 Grohs' expressionist style was targeted by the Nazi party and labeled "degenerate." Many of his creations were banned from public exhibition, confiscated, and then burned. Following the war, the instability and depression in Germany brought hardship for the artist, and he turned towards landscape, still-lives, and portraiture as his subjects.

The Northern Gothic arts, as well as German literature, history, and religion inspired Grohs' creativity. He credited his homeland for shaping his artistic vision:

*My Dithmarschen land, this land of my origin,  
on a storm-torn coast.  
For here are the roots of my creativity.*

He also found inspiration in his trips abroad, as represented in the exhibition's subjects of fjords in Norway and the majestic Dolomite Mountains in the Italian Alps.

The paintings and drawings in *Roots of Creativity* were selected from the permanent collection of the Joel and Lila Harnett Print Study Center, University of Richmond Museums, and from the Frauken Grohs-Collinson Grohs Collection Trust. The exhibition was curated by N. Elizabeth Schlatter, Deputy Director and Curator of Exhibitions, University Museums. We would like to thank Frauken Grohs-Collinson for her ongoing generosity as well as her assistance in organizing this exhibition.

Richard Waller  
*Executive Director*  
*University of Richmond Museums*

## ROOTS OF CREATIVITY

To paint landscapes, in watercolor no less, during the second half of the twentieth century can be seen as a somewhat questionable personal commitment to a genre that many art historians agree peaked in the nineteenth century. How can anyone exceed the sublime, pantheistic landscapes by the German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840)? Or the nationalistic fervor of the monumental images of the Rocky Mountains by the American Hudson River School artist Albert Bierstadt (born Germany, 1830-1902)? And as recently as 1999, Crown Point Press published a portfolio titled "Why Draw A Landscape?," in which



*Höllen-Himmel / The Heaven of Hell [2]*, from the series, *Der Baume Totentanz*, 1964, watercolor and sepia ink on latex-prepared paper, 9 1/2 x 12 1/2 inches. Frauken Grohs Collinson-Grohs Collection Trust

contemporary artists such as Pat Steir and Jane Freilicher answer the question by creating prints that attest to the vitality and relevance of the natural world.

Yet, here is Hans Friedrich Grohs, a prolific artist throughout his life, paring down his entire focus to that of the landscape during his last few decades of creativity. Better known for his pre-WWII dramatic prints addressing the excruciating pain and cruelty of humankind and for images illustrating Nordic history and folklore, Grohs' post-WWII artworks depict a world with only rare references to civilization. Even a series of work based on the *Totentanz*, the Dance of Death theme of human redemption

that Grohs reinterpreted so many times, is portrayed not by people, but by harrowing trees in desolate locations suggesting the horrors at hand, rather than those to come in the afterlife.

What drove this artist to concentrate on nature at this point in his life? Was it a source of solace? A step towards abstraction? A way to acknowledge the immediate past by linking life to the grand history of time? Was Grohs working alone, so to speak, removed from the frenzied artworld of the 1960s, or are there links between his small yet powerful compositions and the works of other more prominent painters from the era?

