



## Research

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Jankel Adler  
*Artist*, 1927  
Oil and sand on canvas  
39 1/2 x 25 1/2" (100.4 x 65 cm)  
Merrill C. Berman Collection

**Jankel Adler (Polish, 1895–1949)**  
**Artist, 1927**

Adrian Sudhalter

“Adler is not a gentle artist,” wrote the art historian Louise Straus on the occasion of the artist’s major retrospective in Poland in 1935, “he does not make access to his pictures easy.”<sup>1</sup> This is certainly true for this large-scale painting, titled in quotation marks on its verso “Artist.” Here is a figure of unsettling proportions: a large head, a grotesquely thick neck, block-like hands, and an impossibly slender waist. Dressed in a bowler hat, loose-fitting jacket (or shirt), and belted pants, he bares more flesh than might be expected. The exposure of his body—from torso to hips, including navel—is less sensual than vaguely exhibitionist; it as though the viewer is offered an x-ray of what lies beneath his clothes. Indeed, the body itself is rendered less as flesh than as an anatomical study of muscle, bone, and tendons. Tinged with blue, red, and brown, the brushstrokes describing the musculature rhyme, somewhat perversely, with the stripes of the sitter’s jacket. Body and fabric together seem to vibrate with tense, nervous energy. By contrast, the sitter’s face appears frozen, almost mask-like; he stares out at the viewer from expressionless eyes with a heavy, joyless intensity.

Alongside the word “Artist,” Adler inscribed his name and address, “Düsseldorf / Liststr. 26,” on the work’s verso. Since Adler had no reason in this period to use English, we can assume that the Polish-born painter, who had been living and exhibiting in Dusseldorf since 1921, titled the work *Artist*, in the German sense.<sup>2</sup> A false friend to the English word, in German “artist” does not describe a painter or sculptor, but rather a performer—an acrobat, say, or trapeze artist. In 1927, the year this work was completed, Adler, a painter deeply embedded in the avant-garde scene of his time, is said to have seen August Sander’s photographic inventory of human “types,” *Menschen des 20. Jahrhunderts* (People of the Twentieth Century), displayed at the Kölnischen Kunstverein. Sander’s series, which categorizes subjects by profession, included various images of *Zirkusartisten* (Circus Artists), such as [fig. 1]. It is possible that Sander’s series prompted Adler to offer his own image of such an “artist” in paint. This would explain the taut musculature, the uninhibited bearing of flesh, and the artifice (the colorful jacket, the hat with flower). If this was Adler’s painted answer to Sander, the effort seems to have been anomalous, a one-time experiment. At the Berlin

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1. Lou Ernst, Preface (in Polish), *Jankel Adler, retrospektywna wystawa obrazów 1920-1935*, exhibition catalogue (Warsaw: Wystawie Klubu Artystów Polskich, 1935): n.p. [3]. Translated to English in *Jankel Adler* (Cologne: Dumont, 1985), p. 69. Louise Straus, Max Ernst’s first wife, wrote under her married name and knew Adler through groups such as Das neue Rhineland.

2. Adler would emigrate to Great Britain in 1940 and could have titled it then, but it is unlikely that at that time he would have inscribed his Dusseldorf address, which appears in the same paint.



Fig. 1. August Sander, *Zirkusartistin* (Circus Artist), 1926, printed 1977. Gelatin silver print, 12 x 9 7/16" (30.4 x 23.9 cm) The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (1979.521.2)



Fig. 2. August Sander, *Maler* (Painter) Jankel Adler, 1924, printed between 1990 and 1999. Gelatin silver print, 10 3/16 x 7 3/8" (25.8 x 18.7 cm) The Museum of Modern Art, New York (472.2015.428)



detail



detail

Fig. 3. August Sander, *MaMuKuBa im Zoo* (Agnes Arntz, Jankel Adler, Frau Grobel, Marta Hegemann, Anton Räderscheidt), 1926. Gelatin silver print, 8 1/2 x 4 3/4" (21.8 x 12.2 cm) Private collection



Fig. 4. Jankel Adler, *Selbstbildnis* (Self-Portrait), c. 1924. Oil and sand on canvas on wood, 27 x 22" (68.5 x 56.5 cm). Von der Heydt-Museum, Wuppertal

*Juryfreie Kunstschau* of 1927, Adler exhibited eight paintings with either overtly Jewish themes or with generic subjects.<sup>3</sup> Like *Artist*, many of these works evidence the impact of Cubism—shallow pictorial space, collage-like juxtapositions of architectural elements (moldings, doorframes, walls), and materiality (sand; combed paint)—but none represents a general “type,” in Sander’s sense.

One would imagine that such a large, declarative painting as *Artist* would have been intended for public display, but evidence of its inclusion in exhibitions in Germany between 1927 and Adler’s departure for France in 1933 has yet to emerge.<sup>4</sup> It is equally possible that this painting was not intended for public display. Close observation of Adler’s facial features—his heart-shaped face, almond-shaped eyes, pouty mouth, and dimpled chin—as captured in Sander’s *Maler* (Jankel Adler) of 1924 [fig. 2], suggest that the work may be a self-portrait. Even more closely related is a photograph of Adler taken by Sander in 1926 at the MaMuKuBa (*Ball der Maler, Musiker und Künstlerfreunde*; Painters’, Musicians’, and Artists’ Friends’ Ball), a costume ball held during Carnival week in Cologne, in which Adler is seen wearing a top hat and thick makeup on one eye [fig. 3].

If *Artist* has elements of a self-portrait, it would not have been Adler’s first or only such image. In a self-portrait of c. 1924 [fig. 4], he employed a more fractured, Cubist approach, in which the

composition is divided into rectilinear planes. Adler’s face, volumetrically rendered at right, is intersected at left by one such plane, which seems to enact a kind of x-ray (to again use the metaphor): here essentializing the facial features into a simple contour drawing. The name “Adler” is inscribed in Yiddish at upper right.

In *Artist*, it is possible that we are presented with a doubling, a layering of identity, in which the artist (*Künstler*) presents himself as the performer (*Artist*). In other words, that Adler pictured himself in costume, disguised as a performer of some kind, an exhibitionist-type; in any case someone who he was not. Perhaps this is Adler taking license during the one week in February when it was the norm to adopt a masquerade, to shed one’s everyday identity and to play at another. Carnival is a week in which people were encouraged to defy typologies, to temporarily suspend fixed identity based on criteria such as profession, nationality, class, and even gender. It is a week when a painter is no longer a painter, a coal miner no longer a coal miner. In Adler’s case, enacting masquerade surely ran deeper. Within his experience, it might even be considered a leitmotif. To be a foreigner, a Pole, and a Jew in Germany was to live in a perpetual state of negotiated identity. To fashion himself as a painter, a cosmopolitan, an avant-garde artist was a way to shed one layer of identity (old-world, foreign) and to adopt another (new, international). To add “performer” was to add yet another layer.

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3. He exhibited five paintings with explicitly Jewish subjects: *Jüde im Bäder* (Bathing Jew), *Jüde mit Buch* (Jew with Book), *Der Chassid* (The Hassidic), *Synagogendiener* (Synagogue Worker), *Jüde mit Hahn* (Jew with Chicken); and three paintings with generic subjects: *Liegende Frau* (Reclining Woman), *Stilleben* (Still Life), *Die Familie* (The Family).

4. A label on the work’s verso with the number “1069” may indicate that it was exhibited. One might expect that the work would have been included in the artist’s 1935 retrospective in Warsaw (and Łódź), which covered the years 1920 to 1935 (see footnote 1), but it was not among the works listed in the catalogue.

This painting may even have been an attempt to thematize the operation of play-acting, masquerade, and the adoption and shedding of personas. Considered in relation to his exhibited portraits of rabbis, Hassidic Jews, and other inhabitants of the world he had grown up in and abandoned, *Artist* is a painting in which Adler may represent both himself and someone else; in which he both reveals himself (quite literally, in the flesh) and conceals himself (in costume as someone else). It is a work in which Adler seems to address his perpetual state of negotiated identity head-on. As such, it stands out as both exceptional and exemplary in the artist's oeuvre, as his major, defining statement of a Jewish artist reinventing himself within the western European avant-garde.