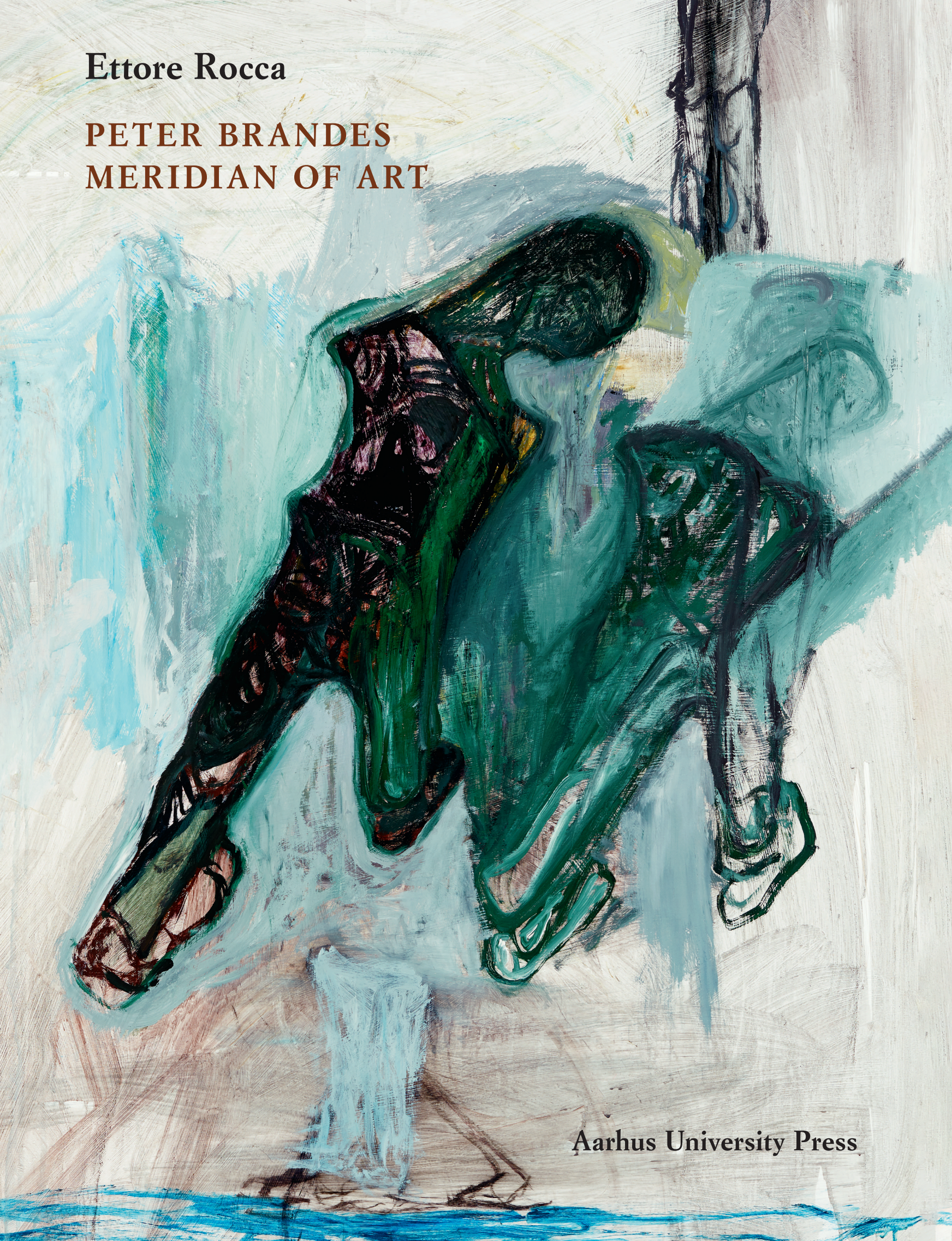


Ettore Rocca

PETER BRANDES  
MERIDIAN OF ART



Aarhus University Press





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To my mother, Sabina Janner



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## PREFACE

Peter Brandes is one of the most significant Danish visual artists alive today. Not only is his *oeuvre* gigantic, spanning a period of more than fifty years, but his works also enjoy an extraordinary degree of visibility. Brandes is represented in the collections of the most important Danish museums, as well as in those of leading international museums, such as the Louvre. His monumental sculptures and jars are found throughout Denmark, and he has decorated numerous churches in Denmark, Norway, and the United States. In Jerusalem, his powerful *Isaac Vase* stands at the Holocaust museum Yad Vashem.

With regard to technique, Brandes has made use of a wide variety of artistic media: painting, sculpture, drawing, graphics, ceramics, photography, and—last but not least—stained glass. At times, Brandes has breathed new life into an older technique, such as stained glass and photography. At other times, he has expanded the boundaries of an existing technique: one need only call to mind his monumental jars.

With regard to content, Brandes has taken part in uninterrupted dialogue with the most varied expressions of culture: with Egyptian religion and Jewish tradition; with the neolithic Vinča culture of the Balkans, and with the Delos culture in Greece; with Homer and the cult of Apollo; with the Gospels and medieval Christian art; with Norse mythology; with German idealism and the Danish Golden Age; and with such authors as Franz Kafka, James Joyce, and Paul Celan. Thematically, Peter Brandes is an incomparable *Kulturwanderer*, an exemplar of cultural migration. Added to this is a family history that is stunningly interwoven into a larger history, namely, that of Denmark and Europe in the first half of the 20th century. This history has been one of the most important wellsprings of reflection and inspiration in Brandes' works.

Faced with such rich and varied material, the most direct approach to take would have been chronological: to describe Peter Brandes' development from his youth until today. Yet I have not followed that path.

Instead, I have chosen to pursue certain themes that cut across various periods of time, different artistic techniques, and the cultures with which Peter Brandes engages in dialogue. I have drawn certain lines in his works forming what I call the *meridian of art*. I have borrowed the concept "meridian" from the poet Paul Celan, the author to whom Peter Brandes has felt most closely tied. For Celan, the meridian is poetry's invisible line, connecting the places where a poetic conversation takes place. The conversation with the other takes place in a concrete place; yet the line connecting these places is, according to Celan, a non-place, a *u-topia*: the utopia of poetry. Similarly, the line connecting the places in Peter Brandes' cultural migration is a meridian, a line that at once appears impossible and ineradicable: the *meridian of art*.

Work on this book has given me the opportunity to clarify aesthetic and philosophical ideas that I have been developing over the course of the past decade. This is the reason for the book's dialogical character—and why it is so important to me.

This book is the product of a decade's engagement with Peter Brandes' *oeuvre*. Some of the chapters are based on articles that I wrote years ago on Brandes' works.<sup>1</sup>

The book has also necessitated new source research on the deportation of Peter Brandes' paternal grandfather to the Nazi extermination camp Sobibór in 1943. I thank Serge Klarsfeld for his generous assistance in this regard.

I also thank Peter Brandes for our many conversations, and for granting access to relevant documents and letters; Carsten Pallesen for his empathetic reading of the manuscript; David D. Possen and Merle Denker Possen for taking on the book's English edition on such short notice; and Galerie Moderne Silkeborg for bibliographical assistance. Finally, my deep thanks to Lise Winther-Jensen for editing the manuscript, and for translating many passages into Danish from numerous languages.

1 "Sedimentation: Peter Brandes' *Transformation*," in *Peter Brandes. Transformation 2: A Series of Etchings* (Kastrup: Kastrupgårdsamlingen / Ribe: Ribe Kunstmuseum, 2011), pp. 5-24; "Art, Architecture and Faith," in *Works of Light: Vejleå Church Ishøj* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2013), pp. 223-233; *At se Abraham* [To See Abraham] (Skive: Forlaget Wunderbuch, 2014); "Es ist der Wurf des Säemanns" [It is the Cast of the Sower], in *Kulturvandrer. Festschrift til Peter Brandes i anledning af halvfjerdårsdagen* [*Kulturwanderer: A Festschrift for Peter Brandes on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday*], ed. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Johannes Riis, and Ettore Rocca (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2014), pp. 173-183; "Prægnans, anerkendelse og nærvær. Svein Aage Christoffersens møde med Peter Brandes" [Poignancy, Acknowledgment, and Presence: Svein Aage Christoffersen's Encounter with Peter Brandes], in *Skapelsesnåde. Festschrift til Svein Aage Christoffersen* [Grace of Creation: A Festschrift for Svein Aage Christoffersen], ed. Stine Holte, Roger Jensen, Marius Timmann Mjaaland (Oslo: Novus, 2017), pp. 23-33; "Peter Brandes' Meridian," in *Peter Brandes. Time Regained. Kulturwanderungen. Creative Powers* (Kerteminde: Johannes Larsen Museum / Lemvig: Museum of Religious Art, 2019), pp. 305-321.

## Chapter 1

### PLACES AND TIMES

#### 1. Cultural Migration

In contemporary art, there are scarcely any other artists for whom a new interpretation of classical *Kulturwanderung* [cultural migration] is as central as it is for Peter Brandes.<sup>1</sup> There is only one other example of a similar cultural migration, and that is found in the work of Anselm Kiefer.<sup>2</sup>

The concept of *Kulturwanderung* goes back far in Western culture. It designates the way in which art forms, sciences, and ideas migrate from people to people, from culture to culture. It first appears in Herodotus's *Histories* (5th century B.C.), where he maintains that the cult of Dionysus came to Greece from Egypt.<sup>3</sup> Plato, too, affirms the Egyptian origins of Greek myths on numerous occasions. In the Roman period, it mattered greatly to Cicero (1st century AD) to demonstrate how philosophy and literature had been passed on [*translatio artium*] from the Greeks to the Romans.<sup>4</sup> In the Middle Ages, Christianity and the European lands north of the Alps were added as a new stage in this cultural migration.

German idealism revived the concept. In Georg W. F. Hegel, cultural migration becomes a linear and progressive development from Orient to Occident, from Asia to Greece, thereafter to the Roman world, and finally to the Christian lands of central Europe.<sup>5</sup> Friedrich Hölderlin was an adherent of this view, which finds expression, for example, in his hymns *Am Quell der Donau* [At the Source of the Danube] and *Germanien* [Germania]. For Hölderlin, however, this spiritual development from the East to Greece and then to the countries north of the Alps has a more constrained and broken character. In his hymns on the philosophy of history—*Friedensfeier* [Celebration of Peace], *Der Einzige* [The Only One], and *Patmos*—Hölderlin links Heracles and Dionysus to Christ, that is, the Greek tradition to the Judeo-Christian. All three are demigods and brothers, yet Christ takes precedence: “But love clings / to One,” we read at the start of *Der Einzige* [The Only

1 I used the concept of *Kulturwanderung* in connection with Peter Brandes' *oeuvre* for the first time in the *laudatio* I delivered at the presentation to Peter Brandes of the Friedrich Hölderlin Preis in Tübingen on November 6, 2013. Later, *Kulturwanderer* was used in the title of Brandes' *Festschrift* (*Kulturvandrer: Festschrift til Peter Brandes i anledning af halvfjerdsårsdagen* [Kulturwanderer: A Festschrift for Peter Brandes on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday], ed. Niels Jørgen Cappelørn, Johannes Riis, and Ettore Rocca (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 2014)). Most recently, the concept has been used as the subtitle of the 2019 exhibition at Johannes Larsen Museum: “Peter Brandes. Time Regained. *Kulturwanderungen*.”

2 On the work of Anselm Kiefer (1945-), see, e.g., Dominique Baqué, *Anselm Kiefer: A Monograph* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2016).

3 Herodotus, *Histories*, II, 49.

4 See Franz Josef Worstbrock, “*Translatio artium*. Über die Herkunft und Entwicklung einer kulturhistorischen Theorie” [*Translatio artium: On the Origin and Development of a Theory in Cultural History*], *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte* 47 (1965) 1, pp. 1-22.

5 Cf., e.g., Georg W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte* [Lectures on the Philosophy of History] in Hegel, *Werke*, vol. 12 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), p. 134.

One] (1802).<sup>6</sup> On the one hand, all three of these figures are sons of God; on the other hand, it is in Christ that love is perfected. Christ's precedence is the precedence of love.

For Peter Brandes, cultural migration is first and foremost a fact inscribed in his family history. But his family history is only an occasion for the migration among cultures that he undertakes with his art. Brandes understands his artistic activity as cultural migration. He is in uninterrupted conversation with his history, and as a result is in continuous dialogue with the most varied array of cultures. The principal characters of classical cultural migration are all present in Brandes' almost encyclopedic longing for subjects both well-known and less-known. He has carried on artistic conversations with the myth of Inanna, the great goddess of the Sumerians; with the Egyptian texts concerning Aten, the sun god from the age of the pharaoh Akhenaten; with the Torah and Jewish tradition; with the Delos culture of Greece; with Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and the Homeric hymns; with Ovid and Virgil in Roman culture; with the Gospels; with Nordic mythology and the ancient sagas; with medieval Christian art; with German idealism in the shape of Friedrich Hölderlin; and with Hans Christian Andersen and Søren Kierkegaard from the Danish Golden Age. "But it is Mediterranean culture, the interaction between Judaism, Christianity, and Hellenism, and the products of culture in that region, that have been the greatest driving force in my art," Peter Brandes has recently remarked.<sup>7</sup>

Yet with Brandes, the very concept of cultural migration is itself fundamentally transformed. It is no longer a forward-looking and progressive development in which the torch of Spirit is passed from place to place. That narrative became impossible in the bloody 20th century—and in the confused and insecure 21st century, it would appear naïve. Neither, however, is it a matter of reading history backwards as a regressive development, and seeking refuge in some lost origin, as was the case for the philosopher Martin Heidegger, for example, in the 20th century. Nor, finally, does it concern postmodern pastiches in which people juggle myths and texts in order to display their learning and impress the spectator—something we have seen many examples of at the end of the 20th century.

For Peter Brandes, the classical migration of culture is transformed in light of his family's experience of being fugitives, as well as in light of the great 20th-century catastrophes of the Western world, from the Shoah to Srebrenica. At the same time, Brandes preserves one element of classical *Kulturwanderung*: there is a common thread that gives his cultural migration a direction. This thread or trail can be called, roughly speaking, a dialogue between art and religions; put another way, it is a concern with how the various forms of art can enter into dialogue with the religious. I will return to this later.

6 Friedrich Hölderlin, *Hymns and Fragments*, trans. Richard Sieburth (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 86-87, vv. 83-84.

7 Peter Brandes and Erland Porsmose, "Art and the Power of Myths," in Peter Brandes, *Time Regained: Kulturwanderungen. Creative Powers* (Kerteminde: Johannes Larsen Museum / Lemvig: Museum of Religious Art, 2019), p. 26.

## 2. Focal Points

Peter Brandes was born a stateless person—son of a stateless father and a Danish mother—in Assens, Denmark, on March 5, 1944. With regard to his *oeuvre*, Brandes' biography is less important than his family history, which is strikingly interwoven into a larger history: that of Denmark and Europe in the first half of the 20th century. This history has been one of Brandes' most important wellsprings for reflection and inspiration. Rather than recount this history chronologically, I will simply point out how certain events have served as focal points for his work as a visual artist.

An event takes place at a point in time. What will be drawn here is simultaneously a line connecting certain focal points in time and space and a line connecting certain motifs in Peter Brandes' works. It will be the works themselves that will convey us from place to place and from time to time, and which will highlight certain historical events. The line connecting these motifs will then serve as our basis for understanding how the classical migration of culture is transformed by Brandes.

The line begins with some of Brandes' most recent works, and with a focal point at Leipzig in 1933. From here we will move on to other locations, both to the west and to the east spatially, and temporally to other dates, both backward and forward in time.

## 3. Leipzig 1933: *Brandes Tonhalle*

One evening the sun, and not only that, had gone down, then there went walking, stepping out of his cottage went the Jew, the Jew and son of a Jew, and with him went his name, unspeakable, went and came, came shuffling along, made himself heard, came with his stick, came over the stone, do you hear me, you hear me, I'm the one, I, I and the one that you hear, that you think you hear, I and the other one—so he walked, you could hear it, went walking one evening when something had gone down, went beneath the clouds, went in the shadow, his own and alien—because a Jew, you know, now what has he got that really belongs to him, that's not borrowed, on loan and still owed—so then he went and came, came down this road that's beautiful, that's incomparable, went walking like Lenz through the mountains, he, whom they let live down below where he belongs, in the lowland, he, the Jew, came and he came.<sup>8</sup>

I was reminded of the Germanophone poet Paul Celan (1920-1970), and of the beginning of his short story *Gespräch im Gebirg* [Conversation in the Mountains], when I saw the drawings and etchings entitled *Brandes Tonhalle Leipzig 1933*, in which Peter Brandes depicts his father Isidor. Peter Brandes produced this series after visiting Leipzig for the first time in the spring of 2018.

Nearly a century earlier, in 1920, the family of Brandes' father was forced to move from Zürich to Leipzig. The entire family was stateless. Peter Brandes' father, Isidor, who later took the names Thomas and Johannes, was then fifteen years old. Young Thomas

8 Paul Celan, *Gespräch im Gebirg*, in Celan, *Der Meridian und andere Prosa* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988), p. 23, as translated in John Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 141.



*Brandes Tonhalle Leipzig 1933*  
2018. Etchings, 43 x 28 cm  
Pastel and pencil, 42 x 21 cm  
Watercolor and pencil, 25 x 14 cm  
Galerie Moderne Silkeborg