

MOURNFUL LAUGH

Artist	Endre Rozsda Mohács, 1913 – Paris, 1999
Date	1983–1991
Object type	painting
Medium, technique	oil on canvas
Dimensions	88 x 65 cm
Inventory number	2001.5.B
Collection	Department of Art after 1800
On view	This artwork is not on display

“For a Hungarian to be born in Mohács is like for a Frenchman to be born in Waterloo”, said Endre Rozsda, an internationally renowned exponent of abstract surrealism, born in the southern Hungarian city in 1913. Rozsda attended the Free School of Vilmos Aba-Novák from 1932, before moving to Paris in 1938, where he spent three years studying at the École du Louvre. In the early 1940s he returned to Budapest, where in 1945 he became one of the founding members of the European School, which brought together painters, sculptors, poets, writers and intellectuals. Faced with diminishing opportunities to exhibit his work after the regime change in 1948, he decided to settle in France. He arrived in Paris in early 1957 and was soon exhibiting regularly at the Galerie Fürstenberg. This brought him into close contact with, among others, André Breton. In Paris, Rozsda was acclaimed by collectors and fellow artists, and in 1964 he was awarded the prestigious Copley Prize, whose jury included Hans Arp, Marcel Duchamp and Max Ernst.

Rozsda’s characteristic forms, tiny and sprawling, swirling and dazzling in picturesque patches of colour, filling the picture space like a kaleidoscope, are also seen in the painting Sad Laugh. At first glance the work appears to be an abstract composition, but as one spends more time with it, its hidden dimensions slowly unfold, eventually revealing figures, faces and objects. The theme of Sad Laugh is the Battle of Mohács, a defeat in the early sixteenth century that led to the occupation of Hungary by the Ottoman Empire. Looking through the dense fabric of the painting, the soldiers suddenly appear, one pushing a cannon, the other holding a shield in front of him. The colours and shapes enter into dialogue with each other, while there is also a sense of self-irony linking the subject of the work, the cheerful splashes of colour, and the title of the picture, which alludes to the type of melancholy celebration often regarded as characteristic of Hungarians.

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