

Hermann Urban, *Tyroler Blechkreuz verrostet (Tyrolean rusted metal cross)*
New Orleans – 1946 Bad Aibling

oil on canvas
39 ¾ by 29 ¾ inches (101 by 75.5 cm.)
signed lower right: 'Urban'; verso signed: 'URBBAN Op 3225 x1 19-27'

provenance: Private collection, Germany;
with Emanuel von Baeyer, London

note: Born in New Orleans to an opera singer mother and a physician father, Hermann Urban traveled extensively with his parents. In the late years of the nineteenth century, Urban was exposed to the art currents of Munich, then an international center of painting. Urban studied in the Munich Academy with the Secession painter and engraver Julius Diez and with Johan Caspar Herterich. Soon after he was discovered and encouraged by Wilhelm Leibl and Franz von Stuck

Between 1886 and 1897 Urban had an atelier in Munich and travelled several times to Italy. In 1894 he became a pupil of Arnold Böcklin in Florence and worked in his studio. He received several awards including the gold medal in 1899 and 1901 at both the Dresden and Munich International Art Exhibitions. This was an outstanding achievement for the artist, as he won these awards against highly acclaimed international competitors from France and Belgium.

In 1908, Urban was appointed a Professor H(honoris) C(causa) by Royal Prince Regent Luitpold of Bavaria. Shortly after this, in 1911, Urban made a trip to Egypt, and the strong, intense light he encountered there became incorporated into his painting style.

Today, Urban is known for his utopian landscapes of southern Germany and Italy. He is also a focus of interest today because of his extensive, scholarly research into the technical aspects of painting materials, including encaustic (wax). Since the early 1890s, Urban studied and developed his own theory of color. His work in this area led to a "renewal of coloring" in his work. Independently he affiliated himself to the Nabis and Fauve movements, which were later promoted by German collectors Henry Kessler and Eberhard Freiherr von Bodenhausen. The artist's studio was destroyed in an air raid in 1944 and many of his pictures and documents vanished.

A rusty metal wayside cross stands in the center of the image behind an autumn harvest cornfield. The rust has taken its toll and has obliterated the facial features of both the Savior and of Mary. The image may be based on the second commandment from the Bible: "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image". Another interpretation might be the artist's concern with the rejection of faith and disregard and neglect of religion.

Especially noticeable in our painting is a link, not only in the use of color but also religious subject, to Urban's contemporary Maurice Denis (1870-1943). There also is an artistic connection between this work and the landscape painting of the earlier Swiss Symbolist Ferdinand Hodler (1853-1918). Both artists favor a realism of expression and color in their depictions of nature. The earlier works of Odilon Redon also come to mind when considering the artistic background of the present painting.