

## FRITZ GLARNER (1899–1972)

### *The Rockefeller Dining Room, 1963/1964*

#### **Rockefeller Dining Room: commission and method**

For the design of the dining room in Nelson A. Rockefeller's New York City apartment, the idea of a mural was discussed when the project began. However, the Swiss-American painter Fritz Glarner opted to fill the surfaces of the walls and ceiling with individual large-format oil paintings on canvas. Glarner approached the demanding commission with a series of black-and-white sketches and colored studies. He then made a maquette, about one meter high; this scale model enabled him to assess the effect of his design. As the exhibited archive material shows, Glarner modified his concept during the painting process. Once the works were completed in the studio, they were transported to New York and mounted on site by Glarner and his wife, with the help of Margareta "Happy" Rockefeller and a team of assistants. Glarner had no involvement in the furniture or lighting – the client decided on these.

#### **Artistic interior design and "relational painting"**

Already in the context of Russian constructivism, and mainly in association with De Stijl and the Bauhaus later, artists were not only implementing their geometric compositions in paintings and sculptures, but also applying them to product designs, interior design and architecture. With his concept for the Rockefeller Dining Room, Glarner joined in with this integration of art into everyday life. The dining room was his first (and only) commission for a comprehensive interior design, but he was able to draw on the experience that he had gathered during earlier commissioned work.

Glarner designed the Rockefeller Dining Room as a walk-through painting, in line with the "relational painting" concept that he had developed in the 1940s. He was primarily interested in the relationship between the visual elements, the harmonious interaction between forms and colors (the primary colors red, blue and yellow, along with gray, black and white). The base form is always the rectangle, which gives rise to the compositional structure: The rhythmically eventful positioning of differently sized tapered forms beside or above each other, and the precise, seemingly melodic realization of color accents (Glarner's masterful play with the opposites warm/cold, near/far, neutral/colored and light/dark) merge to constitute a polyphonically orchestrated color space.

The Rockefeller Dining Room remained in situ for around 20 years. In the 1980s, it was put up for sale. The Foundation for Constructivist, Concrete and Conceptual Art managed to persuade the Paul Büchi Foundation, Frauenfeld, to purchase it in 1994. Thanks to the commitment of both foundations, the original was preserved – one of constructivist-concrete art's most significant interior design works. In 2016, Museum Haus Konstruktiv realized a very special project, bringing Fritz Glarner's permanently exhibited Rockefeller Dining Room closer to its original purpose: Well-known designer Alfredo Häberli was invited to conceive a new interior, so as to make it possible to experience Glarner's artwork in the context of a dining room once again.

The room is available for hire.

## **Biography**

Fritz Glarner was used to frequent changes of residence since childhood: Due to his father's job as a mill designer, the family had to move many times. They lived in Naples, then Paris, then Chartres and, in 1913, back in Naples again. That was where Glarner obtained his first training in art and artisanry, at Regio Istituto di Belle Arti from 1914 to 1920. However, his stay in Paris from 1923 to 1925 was decisive with regard to his understanding of art and his approach to abstraction: There, he was received by the vibrant circle surrounding art theorist Michel Seuphor, which included avant-garde artists Theo van Doesburg, Fernand Léger, Piet Mondrian, Georges Vantongerloo, Robert and Sonia Delaunay, the married couple Jean Arp and Sophie Taeuber-Arp etc. In 1928, Glarner married the American Louise Powell.

After relatively long stays in the USA, Paris and Zurich, the couple emigrated to New York in 1936. Glarner still maintained a lively exchange with artists in Europe, especially with Max Bill, which led to his participation in the 1936 exhibition *Current Problems in Swiss Painting and Sculpture* at Kunsthhaus Zurich; likewise, Glarner became a member of Allianz, an association of modern Swiss artists founded in 1937. Also in New York, the artist mainly operated in the context of the European and American avant-garde; as a member of American Abstract Artists, he took part in this organization's exhibitions and symposiums from 1938 onward. Mondrian also emigrated to New York in 1940 and Glarner maintained a close friendship with him until the former's death four years later. Glarner evolved into a central figure on the American art scene. He was represented in numerous international exhibitions and gave lectures at the short-lived Subjects of the Artist School (1948-1949) in New York.

After becoming an American citizen, Glarner lived in Huntington, Long Island, from 1957 onward. His spacious studio home enabled him to address the large format and "art in architecture" (and to pursue his second passion: gardening). Sometimes with his architect friend Wallace K. Harrison acting as an intermediary, he was entrusted with four major art-in-architecture projects in New York: He was able to realize murals for the Time & Life Building (1958-1960), the Dag Hammarskjöld Library at the UN headquarters (1961/1962), the Rockefeller Dining Room (1963/1964) and the New York State Justice Building in Albany (designed in 1967/1968, implemented in 1972).

On a stormy sea voyage in 1966, Glarner suffered a severe head injury after which he was no longer able to work as he used to. In 1971, he and his wife moved back to Switzerland and made themselves at home in a Locarno neighborhood where friends lived nearby. Glarner died on September 18th, 1972, shortly before the end of the retrospective dedicated to him at Kunsthalle Bern. His artistic estate (paintings, prints and archive) went to Kunsthhaus Zurich and a smaller group of works remained in the possession of the canton Ticino.