

Maria Lassnig: biography

Maria Lassnig is regarded as one of the most important artists of the present day. Over the course of her remarkable career, she created a substantial body of work in the fields of painting and graphics alongside her excursions into (animated) film and sculpture. Lassnig conducted a focused dialogue with her art, which always constituted the pivotal strand of her life. Her artistic work can be regarded as a means of self-empowerment and is also directed against social conventions. Sometimes she reveals herself as a sufferer, a misunderstood and lonely human being. Even though Lassnig's work only gained well deserved public recognition at a relatively late stage in her life, her works feature in the collections of major museums today. Overall, her oeuvre continues to resonate across broad sections of society and serves as a source of inspiration for artists of all ages.

Maria Lassnig was born the daughter of Mathilde Gregorz in the little village of Garzern near Kappel am Krappfeld in Carinthia, Austria on 8 September 1919. It wasn't until she had already become an adult that she first met her actual father. Until the age of six she was raised by her grandmother – her mother's job meant that she had no time to look after her. After her mother married the baker Jakob Lassnig, the family moved to Klagenfurt in 1925. It was here that Lassnig attended the Ursuline convent school where she took her Austrian school leaving examination. Her artistic skills emerged during this time. She then completed a one-year primary school teacher training course and taught at elementary schools in the Carinthian Metnitztal, where she drew portraits of schoolchildren. Lassnig would regularly revisit her native Province during her long stays in France and the United States; she even set up a summer studio in Carinthia in the 1980s.

Lassnig was accepted for a place at the Akademie der bildenden Künste (Academy of Fine Arts) in Vienna during the winter semester of 1940–41. She initially studied painting under Prof Wilhelm Dachauer in his master class. Due to artistic differences with Prof Dachauer over her idea of “vertical, absolute colour vision”, she was expelled from his class in 1943. Lassnig continued her studies under Prof Ferdinand Andri and under Prof Herbert Boeckl in his evening nude painting classes, which gave her artistic inspiration. Lassnig graduated from the Academy in January 1945.

In 1945 Lassnig returned to Klagenfurt where her studio became a meeting place of artists and writers such as Michael Guttenbrunner, Arnold Clementschitsch, Max Hölzer and Arnold Wande. She first met Arnulf Rainer (ten years her junior) in Carinthia in 1947. At this time, influences of *Kärntner Kolorismus* (or *Carinthian colourism*, as represented by Arnold Clementschitsch, Herbert Boeckl, Anton Kolig and Franz Wiegele) became noticeable in Lassnig's work. She was chiefly painting expressive portraits, nude studies and interiors as well as depictions of still life and animals.

As Lassnig herself put it, her early years were marked by experiences with various “isms”, including artistic currents in surrealism and of automatism from the late 1940s. Her first “body awareness” drawings, which emerged in 1949, were referred to as *introspective experiences*.

After moving to Vienna in 1951, Lassnig became a member of the so-called *Hundsgruppe* (Dog Pack), a short-lived spin-off of the Art Club which included Arik Brauer, Ernst Fuchs, Wolfgang Kudrnofsky and Arnulf Rainer. Having received a scholarship, she travelled to Paris in the same year (with Arnulf Rainer). Paul Celan arranged for her to meet representatives of Surrealism such as André Breton, Benjamin Péret and Toyen. On her second trip to Paris, the *Véhemences Confrontées* exhibition at the Nina Dausset gallery with its works of art *informel* and abstract expressionism made a lasting impression on her. Back in Austria, Lassnig and Rainer organised the *Junge unfigurative Malerei* (Young Non-figurative Painting) exhibition at the Künstlerhaus Klagenfurt. Influenced by *art informel*, she created the series *Amorphe Rhythmen*, *Statische Meditationen*, *Der aktive Ekel*, *Flächenteilungen* (Amorphous Rhythms, Static Meditations, Active Disgust, Field Divisions) and monotypes between 1951 and 1953. In 1952, Lassnig returned to Paris and exhibited at Vienna's Art Club gallery which was located in the Strohkoffer café underneath the Loos bar.

She returned to the Vienna Academy in 1954 in order to attend the master school of painting under Albert Paris Gütersloh. Her explorations of post-cubism were accompanied by her so-called *Kopfheiten* (Headnesses) paintings in which she assembled faces (as well as bodies) from colour fields. Lassnig maintained contacts with writers from the circle of the Wiener Gruppe including H. C. Artmann, Friedrich Achleitner, Gerhard Rühm, Oswald Wiener, Friederike Mayröcker and Ernst Jandl, and was involved in the Exil art club which would meet at the Adebar jazz bar around 1954/55. From 1956 she began to develop closer contacts to the art scene around Monsignore Otto Mauer and the Galerie nächst St. Stephan (including Wolfgang Hollegha, Josef Mikl, Markus Prachensky and Arnulf Rainer). Lassnig held four exhibitions at the Galerie nächst St. Stephan from 1960 to 1973.

A study tour led Lassnig to Italy and Greece (Rome, Naples and Athens, etc.) in 1958. Towards the end of the 1950s, she revisited *art informel* and used watercolours or gouache to analyse body sensations. This resulted in a sequence of *tachiste* paintings which Lassnig went on to develop still further after she moved to Paris in 1961. It was here that she released herself from stylistic constraints and began painting large-scale "body awareness" figurations (so-called *Strichbilder*, or Fine Line Pictures) which pointed to the approach she would adopt in her later work.

In the next few years, she developed narrative paintings with one or more figures which borrowed from technoid forms of science fiction. Body parts blend with objects and become geometric figures, sometimes set in absurdly caricatured scenes. Monstrous, plastic self-portraits emerged alongside this group of works. The death of her mother in 1964 plunged Lassnig into an existential crisis. She began painting so-called *Beweinungsbilder* (Weeping Pictures) that express her grief and her intense – though ambivalent – relationship with her mother.

In Paris, Lassnig became friends with the poet Paul Celan and his wife, the graphic artist Gisèle Celan-Lestrange, in addition to the artist Hans Bischoffshausen. Further companions during the Paris years were the Hildebrands, a married couple who ran an avant-garde gallery in Klagenfurt and lent their support to Lassnig.

In 1968, Lassnig moved to New York where she lived and worked in various studios, first in Queens, then on Avenue B in the East Village from 1969, and on Spring Street in SoHo from 1974 to 1978. Her paintings once again switched direction. On the one hand, Lassnig turned to external realism and painted portraits (including commissioned works) and still lifes, but combined these with self-portraits based on *Körpergefühl*. The notion of *Körpergefühl* (literally “body sensation”) was reworked into *body awareness* to meet American language expectations.

In 1970, Lassnig attended an animated film class at the School of Visual Arts in New York. She created several (animated) films based on the template of body awareness drawings, eight of which were eventually released. In 1972, her animated film *Selfportrait* was awarded the New York State Council Prize. In 1974, she was a co-founder of the Women/Artist/Filmmakers, Inc. in New York; this association included feminist film-makers and artists such as Martha Edelheit, Carolee Schneemann, Silvianna Goldsmith as well as Rosalind Schneider. In addition to her explorations of cinema, Lassnig also experimented with the silkscreen technique and worked on a painting complex of (self-) portraits featuring depictions of animals in the mid-1970s.

Subsequently, the first retrospective of her graphic works took place at the Albertina in Vienna in 1977. In the same year, Lassnig was awarded the City of Vienna’s Award for Fine Art. In 1978, she received a scholarship from the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and went for a year to Berlin where she moved into a studio in the Grunewald. She began creating more and more landscape drawings and watercolours as well as graphic body awareness and perception studies. Her approach drew heavily on cognitive science and was based on an intensive dialogue with the writer Oswald Wiener, who was living in Berlin at the time. Wiener had been exploring this issue since the start of the 1970s. In 1979, Lassnig returned to New York where she inhabited an apartment on First Avenue with views across the whole of New York.

In 1980, at the instigation of Federal Minister Hertha Firnberg and university vice-chancellor Oswald Oberhuber, Lassnig was awarded a professorship – with a focus on painting – at the Hochschule für Angewandte Kunst (University of Applied Arts) in Vienna. From 1980 to 1989, Lassnig held the master class for design and experimental theory. Apart from painting, she also focused her teaching on animated film and set up a teaching studio headed by Hubert Sielecki in 1982.

Having only just returned to Austria, Lassnig and VALIE EXPORT staged an exhibition at the Austrian pavilion on the occasion of the Venice Biennale in 1980. The artist took part in *documenta 7*, Kassel, in 1982.

In the early 1980s, Lassnig’s self-portraits repeatedly explored issues of overload and enforced estrangement. On her holidays to the Mediterranean and the Middle East she painted watercolours of landscapes and with mythological content – a reference which Lassnig increasingly used throughout the 1980s. In the mid-1980s, the *Innerhalb und außerhalb der Leinwand* (Inside and Outside the Canvas) cycle reflected on the “picture-in-picture” issue. Lassnig also began dealing more extensively with nature, with “rural life”.

The first major retrospective exhibition of Maria Lassnig's paintings opened at the Museum moderner Kunst (Museum of Modern Art) in Vienna in 1985. In 1988 she was awarded the Großer Österreichischer Staatspreis (Grand Austrian State Prize) – marking the first time this distinction had been conferred on a woman in the field of fine arts. With her colour figurations *Be-Ziehungen* (a play on words referring both to relationships and drawings) and *Malfflüsse* (another pun, here literally rendered as Paint Flows) in the early 1990s, Lassnig referenced her *Strichbilder* of thirty years earlier. In collaboration with Hubert Sielecki, the film *Maria Lassnig Kantate* (The Ballad of Maria Lassnig) was released in 1992. In 1995, the artist once again participated in the Venice Biennale and in Kassel's *documenta X* two years later. In 1997, Lassnig formally retired from her teaching duties at the Hochschule für angewandte Kunst in Vienna; de facto, she had stopped exercising this profession in 1989. In 1998, she was awarded the Oskar Kokoschka Prize.

As of the late 1990s, Lassnig increasingly focused her attention on creating so-called *Drastische Bilder* (Drastic Pictures) in which she explored major existential themes such as the difficult relationship between men and women, unchosen lifestyles – *Illusionen* (Illusions), as well as impermanence, death and destruction. Her numerous self-portraits with animals also refer to the combination of the human and the animalistic. Moreover, Lassnig worked on the extensive graphic cycle of *Landleute* (Country People) as of 1996. With her so-called *Fußballbilder* (Football Pictures), Lassnig took an ironic swipe at a domain of sport dominated by men.

In 2002, Lassnig was awarded the Roswitha Haftmann Prize, a distinction followed by the Rubens Prize of the City of Siegen, which marked the first time that this award had been conferred on a woman artist. In 2004, Lassnig was recognised by the city of Frankfurt with the Max Beckmann Prize for her “exceptional contribution to contemporary painting”. In 2005, Lassnig received the Austrian Decoration for Science and Art, the highest award bestowed by the Republic of Austria for scientific or artistic achievements.

From 2005 to 2007, the so-called *Nachtbilder* or *Kellerbilder* (Night or Basement Pictures) marked the emergence of a new complex of paintings which Lassnig presented at an exhibition held in London's Serpentine Gallery in 2008. In these later years, Lassnig managed to achieve international renown – not least through the support of international galleries – and was increasingly represented in museums. In 2009, the mumok in Vienna dedicated a solo exhibition to her, emphasising the paintings she had created after 2000, while Cologne's Ludwig Museum honoured Lassnig with a graphics show. In 2010, Lassnig's current work was exhibited at the Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich. In 2012, the Neue Galerie Graz / Universalmuseum Joanneum devised a retrospective solo exhibition which incorporated some of the artist's works that had never been shown before. This complex of works and other pieces was put on display in the Deichtorhallen Hamburg (in 2013), and the MoMA PS1 in New York (in 2014). In 2013, the enormous resonance of Lassnig's late work culminated in her receiving the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement at the Venice Biennale.

Maria Lassnig died at the age of 94 in Vienna on 6 May 2014.