

## HERMAN, JOSEF (1911 - 2000), artist

**Name:** Josef Herman  
**Date of birth:** 1911  
**Date of death:** 2000  
**Spouse:** Catriona Herman (née MacLeod)  
**Spouse:** Eleanor Marie Herman (née Ettlinger)  
**Child:** David Herman  
**Child:** Sara Herman  
**Child:** Rebekah Herman  
**Parent:** Sarah Herman (née Krukman)  
**Parent:** David Herman  
**Gender:** Male  
**Occupation:** artist  
**Area of activity:** Art and Architecture  
**Author:** Mike Hawkins

Josef Herman was born on 3 January 1911 in Warsaw, Poland, the eldest of the three children of David Herman (c.1873?-1942), a cobbler, and his wife, Sarah Krukman (c.1893?- 1942). Josef had a brother Shmiel and a sister Zelda. With a partner Emanuel Friedman, David owned a shoe factory which employed twenty or so workers. This partner took advantage of David's illiteracy and deceived him into putting his mark on a document agreeing to sell their business, then absconded to America with the funds, leaving David a broken man. The family then lived in poverty in the Jewish quarter of Warsaw. In this crowded accommodation Josef developed his life-long habit of rising at four in the morning to have time to himself.

Josef Herman was introduced to painting when he performed chores for Master Xavery Rex, a local artist. Herman left school aged thirteen and, weak and constantly hungry, was unable to keep a job, until at the age of sixteen his uncle arranged for him to be apprenticed to the type setter Felix Yacubowitch. Three years later he fell ill with lead poisoning after being fed sandwiches containing inky type, as a 'welcome' to the fraternity of printers. Herman was advised to avoid lead, so then became a freelance graphic designer and enrolled at the Warsaw School of Art and Decoration (1930-32). Disappointed with academic teaching he left to learn technique from other artists, and became influenced by Munch. In 1932 he held his first exhibition of pictures in a frame maker's shop, but there is no record of any sales.

Poland had become more inhospitable to Jews and Herman was arrested several times in round-ups of Jewish intellectuals. In 1938 Herman left for Belgium. Although modern Polish artists were then drawn towards Paris, Herman preferred the intensity and simplicity of Dutch and Flemish art. 'A great French painting makes my mouth water, a great Northern painting makes my head spin.' [Related *Twilights*, p. 53.] He was never to return or see his family again. In 1942 the Red Cross told him that his family had been killed in the Nazi gas-vans in Warsaw.

To avoid problems with the immigration authorities, Herman enrolled at the Brussels Academy of Fine Arts and studied under Constant Permeke (1886-1952), the leading Belgian Expressionist painter and sculptor. Following the Nazi invasion of Belgium, Herman fled through France to La Rochelle, where the Polish Military Police saw his black leather coat and beret and mistook him for a deserting Polish airman. He was arrested and put on a ship to England, arriving in Liverpool in June 1940. From there he was sent, unable to speak English, to the Polish consulate which was in Glasgow.

He remained in Glasgow for a few years. In 1942 the artist Catriona MacLeod (d. 1987), daughter of a wealthy whisky distiller, attended an exhibition by Herman in Edinburgh and bought five paintings; she asked to be Herman's pupil in Glasgow. He did not want pupils but a relationship developed and a few months later they were married. News of the death of his family brought on a recurring deep depression which was diagnosed as schizophrenia. In 1943 they moved to London, and Herman held his first exhibition there at the Reid and Lefevre Gallery, shared with another unknown artist, L. S. Lowry.

Herman had often painted Jewish themes but felt he lacked a significant subject. This changed when he visited Wales. In 1944 he came to Brecon in search of dramatic landscapes and met Dai Alexander Williams, a carpenter who also worked in the mines and wrote short stories, who introduced him to the mining community of Ystradgynlais at the top of the Swansea valley. Herman saw a group of miners returning from work briefly outlined on a bridge against a copper-coloured sunset:

*'The image of the miners on the bridge against that glowing sky mystified me for years with its mixture of sadness and grandeur, and it became the source of my work for years to come. The image filled me with certainty that this village was the right place for me. I felt my inner emptiness filling.'* [Related *Twilights*, p. 73]

That image stayed with him and gave him the subject he needed. For the next eleven years Herman lived in Ystradgynlais and painted and drew the miners. He thought of miners as old Egyptian carvings, dark rocks in human shape, or heavy logs synthesising the pride and dignity of human labour. He was swiftly accepted into the community and nicknamed 'Joe Bach', and he became a successful distinctive artistic force in Britain. According to Osi Rhys Osmond, Ystradgynlais gave him a personal and social stability he had never experienced before, and Herman said he stayed because Ystradgynlais gave him everything he required.

In 1948 Herman turned a derelict pop factory into a studio and home for the couple. The same year he became a naturalised British citizen. His 'Miners' mural for the Festival of Britain (1951), painted on six 29 foot by 14 foot panels with help from students at the then Swansea College of Art, is in the Glynn Vivian Art Gallery in Swansea.

Herman suffered from respiratory illness and was advised by his doctors to leave Wales for a drier climate. In 1955 he returned to London, where he met doctor, later psychotherapist, Eleanor Marie (Nini) Ettlinger (1925-2015), who became his model, and more. In 1957 they had a son David. In 1960 Herman divorced Catriona MacLeod, and married Nini on 11 March 1961. They two had more children, daughters Sara (1962-1966) and Rebekah (Becci), who was adopted. He had a joint exhibition with L. S.

Lowry and Nehemia Azaz at the Wakefield City Art Gallery in 1955 and retrospectives at the Whitechapel Gallery in London in 1956, in Glasgow in 1975 and at Camden Arts Centre in London in 1980.

An attempt to settle in Suffolk in 1961 was dogged by disaster. In the mid-1960s his severe depression returned and he was unable to work. In 1966 their infant daughter Sara died and Herman was given electroconvulsive therapy and drug treatment. It was not until 1975 that the family was reunited. Herman died at his home, 120 Edith Road, Barons Court, London, on 19 February 2000, and was cremated on 23 February at Golders Green Crematorium.

Herman won the Eisteddfod Gold Medal in 1962, was awarded an OBE in 1981 and elected a Fellow of the Royal Academy in 1990. His works are held in numerous British collections, including the Art Gallery and Museum, Glasgow; the Glyn Vivian Art Gallery, Swansea; the National Museum and Gallery of Wales, Cardiff; The Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh; the Tate collection and the British Museum, London; Birmingham City Art Gallery; Leeds City Art Gallery; the City Art Gallery, Bristol; and Aberdeen Art Gallery.

The Josef Herman Art Foundation was established in 2002 and is based at the Welfare Hall in Ystradgynlais. In June 2023, it was announced that Sardis, an empty chapel in Ystradgynlais, would be converted into a gallery displaying his works and telling his story. Josef Herman is remembered for his profound contribution to the portrayal of working-class life, his influence on British social realism, his role in Welsh cultural history, and his legacy as an artist who gave voice to the marginalized and the oppressed. His work remains a powerful testament to the dignity and resilience of the human spirit.

## Author

Mike Hawkins

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## Works

[Josef Herman 1911-2000](#), Art UK  
[Josef Herman, Miners, 1951](#), Glynn Vivian  
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[Josef Herman 1911-2000](#), Tate

## Additional Links

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