

Entangled Histories: Surinamese Artist Josef Nassy's Visual Diary of Internment in Nazi Germany

During World War II, the Caribbean provided safe haven to some refugees from Nazi-occupied Europe. Meanwhile, Caribbean expatriates living in Europe found themselves caught up in the war and, in some cases, imprisoned. This paper revisits these entangled wartime histories through the lens of visual art. In particular, I will discuss the testimonial art of the little known Surinamese painter Josef Nassy, who was interned by the Nazis between 1942 and 1945. It was thanks to materials supplied by the YMCA that Nassy was able to produce over two hundred artworks during his internment.

Nassy was a talented artist of mixed African, Sephardic Jewish, and European descent who moved to New York as a teenager and then settled in Brussels in the early 1930s. While living in occupied Belgium, he was arrested as an enemy national and imprisoned in internment camps in Belgium and Bavaria. Among his fellow internees were a number of Black musicians, dancers, athletes and tradesmen who were residing in Europe in the 1930s and 40s. The paintings and drawings that Nassy created during his three-year internment provide a unique visual record of this transnational presence of Caribbean and other African diaspora people in the Nazi camp system. In particular, Nassy's artworks illustrate how shifting from a textual to a visual lens can enable an unremembered history to enter our field of vision, thereby generating an alternative wartime narrative.