

Hella de Jonge - Closer to their souls



Exhibition texts Dutch Resistance Museum

[Introduction]

Hella de Jonge – closer to their souls

The childhood of Hella de Jonge (1949) is characterized by creativity. She dances, plays the violin and studies art at the *Gerrit Rietveld Academie*. When her fellow students harshly criticize one of her first works, she switches her focus to jewelry-making and fashion. After graduating she starts as a sculptor. As of 1980 she creates the theatre sets and costumes for her true love, cabaret performer Freek de Jonge.

In 2020, during Covid, Hella decides to take up painting again. It turns into an exploration of her family history. Through her paintings Hella gets to know family members she has never met. Her Jewish parents go into hiding and survive The Second World War, while almost their entire family is murdered. Nobody ever mentions that at home. The atmosphere is emotionless and her upbringing is strict. Little Hella has the urge to live, to dance, to be carefree. They clash. The relationship with her parents is troublesome till the end.

When in this day and age, war seems to come nearer every day, Hella's paintings are an inspiration. "I feel powerless, thinking of all the innocent victims and their families. What is to become of all these damaged people? How are they going to raise their children?"

In her paintings Hella expresses the loss of security and innocence, illustrating the pain she feels when seeing injustice and violence.



Self-portrait, 2022

oil on canvas



The quay, 2023

acrylic on canvas



Free from the world, 2025

oil on canvas, ballet shoes

Hella de Jonge

“I was six years old when I joined a ballet class. When I danced, I felt free from the world, free from family life. I could always sense my parents’ hidden pain, but I didn’t understand it. Their war trauma is also part of me. At the age of 71, I started painting. Through my paintings I can make a connection with members of my family I have never known, my parent’s pain and with the little girl I was.

This painting is based on a picture of me taken in 1956 by Henk Jonker, photographer and a member of the resistance. These days, with wars everywhere, carefree dancing seems impossible.”

[Quote]

“With every brushstroke, I seem to get to know my family better. The more often I portray them, the closer I get to their souls.”

[Gallery text]

Lost family

A portrait of Hella’s grandmother, Carolina Croiset-Miller (Lientje), has a prominent place in her parents’ living room. Dark eyes in a stern face. Sixty years later Hella decides to transform the angry expression and she paints her grandmother in her own way. This was the beginning of a series of family portraits.

Hella’s parents, Eva Croiset and Eli Asser, work during the war in a Jewish psychiatric asylum, *Het Apeldoornse Bos*. Jews were supposed to be safe there. Lientje harbored Jewish refugees before the

war, so Eva is aware of the Nazis' horrific treatment of Jews. When *Het Apeldoornse Bos* is visited by a high ranking Nazi in 1943, she understands the implications. Later Eli tells his daughter: "We fled through the back, jumped a ditch and ran across the fields." That same night all patients and staff are transported to Auschwitz. Eva and Eli survive the war. The only member of their family to return, is Rosette Miller (Ro): Lientje's younger sister. Ro keeps a lot of documents relating to her family: letters, identity cards, pictures and proofs of life. They form the inspiration for many of the paintings with which Hella brings her lost family members back into her life.



Intertwined generations I, 2021

acrylic on canvas

Carolina Croiset-Miller (grandmother)

"In 1925, my grandmother Lientje is widowed at the age of 24. During the war she went into hiding at Jan Mulder's, the painter of the portrait in our living room. She was betrayed and murdered in

Auschwitz. While painting I can feel the tragedy of her never knowing her grandchildren, so I gave her a grandchild to hold in the painting.”



Rebecca Asser, 2021
acrylic on canvas



On the way to the Asser family
acrylic on canvas

**Isaac Asser (grandfather), Rebecca Asser (aunt),
Anne Asser-van West (grandmother)**

“Concerning my father’s family, I only have a school picture of his sister Rebecca and a passport photo of his mother. Rebecca has a large bow on her head, a golden chain, a bracelet and even a watch, even though they were poor. In my mind I see her walking to school, proud and all adorned

for the picture. It wasn't until I was 64 that I learned that my grandfather Isaac was a peddler. He travelled the country to sell his wares. I reunite the family on my canvas. Isaac seems lost, looking for his wife and child. How would my father, had he still lived, have reacted to this painting? Would it have gotten him talking?"



The Millers

acrylic on canvas

Rosette Miller (great aunt), David Miller (great uncle), Carolina Croiset-Miller (grandmother), Eva Asser-Croiset (mother), Eva Miller-Cohensius (great grandmother), Abraham Miller (great grandfather)

"These are the Millers, my mother's family. My grandmother Lientje, her sister Ro and brother David, together in the garden of their home. My mother Eva is standing on the threshold with her grandmother and grandfather. Lientje, with the bonnet, suddenly appeared to have another face while I painted her: didn't she neglect Eva? Since her husband died, she didn't care for her on weekdays. That's why the Miller grandparents are standing behind their granddaughter. Ro and Eva survive the war. The others live on in stories only."



Aunt Ro with secret, 2023

acrylic on canvas

Rosette Miller (great aunt)

“In 2010 I got hold of a mover’s box my father wanted to get rid of in a panic. It contained great aunt Ro’s archive. During the war she went into hiding and was the only survivor in my parents’ family. After the war she helped my parents financially, so they could start their life together. When I was little, she lived with us. I adored her. Ro often showed us a small suitcase with a yellow Star of David and identity cards. It stayed in the living room.”



Simultaneous duettists II

**oil and acrylic on canvas, copy of a handwritten
goodbye-letter**

Abraham Miller (grandfather) with partner



Simultaneous duettist III

oil and acrylic on canvas, ballet shoes

Abraham Miller (grandfather) with partner

“My great grandfather Abraham Miller, was partner in a comedy duo: Carel and Carels. I found pictures in the family archive. It moves me that he was a performer, just as I found happiness in dancing. By positioning ballet shoes in the painting, it brings me closer to him and shows that something of him has been handed down to me. I also found a heart-breaking goodbye-letter from Abraham and his wife Eva to their children. “Live with the blessing of God (...) If we don’t get to see each other again, think of us with a child’s love.”



Lientje and Hijman Croiset, 2024

acrylic on canvas

Carolina Croiset-Miller (grandmother), Hijman Croiset (grandfather)

“Hijman Croiset, my grandfather, was a famous actor. Lientje’s family forced him to marry her when she became pregnant. Not long after, Hijman died of angina pectoris, the heart condition I also suffer from. Is this actor embedded in my genes? While working on the portrait I almost unintentionally draw gravestones at their feet. They walk between the lime trees that flank a lane of the family graveyard where Maggie, our granddaughter, also rests. She died of a hereditary heart condition.”



Reconciliation, 2026

oil on canvas

Rosette Miller (great aunt), Carolina Croiset-Miller (grandmother)

“In this painting I have reunited my grandmother and her sister. Lientje, here pregnant with my mother, moved in circles that resisted the Nazis, before and during the war. Ro worked for The Jewish Council, that carried out the demands made by the Nazis. Lientje resented that. My father told me the sisters argued all the time, but I also know the strength of family ties. You can’t just let go, you share a past and understand each other. Only Ro survived the war so there never was a reconciliation. In this painting, I reunite them.”

[Gallery text]

Intertwined generations

In Hella’s stories of her family before, during and after The Second World War the themes keep appearing. For instance, the amazing number of artists throughout the family. Hella inherited the art of costume making from her mother and grandmother. In her visual work she also uses

textiles and handicraft. The loss of children and a weak heart occur in several generations.

In 1974 Hella and Freek lose Jork, their three month old son. Hella's mother reacts coldly to this loss. The diary of Etty Hillesum is a solace in Hella's grief. The Jewish Etty describes her life during The Second World War. She is mild in spite of the persecution of Jews, the injustices and the hate the war brings. Etty is murdered in Auschwitz. Hella's seven-year-old granddaughter Maggie dies of a hereditary heart condition. The loss of Jork and Maggie appears in her paintings. For example, in a symbolic pram. In Hella's paintings past and present merge.



Five generations I, 2022

acrylic on canvas

**Carolina Croiset-Miller (grandmother), Eva
Croiset-Asser (mother), Hella de Jonge-Asser**

“Here you see grandmother Lientje, holding my mother. I stand behind her skirt, hiding behind a grandmother I have never known. The stroller and

the doll represent the next generations. In the background Auschwitz emerges. That brave, small, wiry woman poses in a homemade dress. I know that because of the stitching and buttons on a picture of her I found. Apparently she taught my mother to sew. So really, I inherited it from my grandmother. Did it upset my mother when she taught me the tricks of the trade? Did she think of her own mother?"



Hella Simonis, 2021

acrylic on canvas

"My father met Hella Simonis at the 'Barleus Gymnasium' in Amsterdam. In 1942 she started working in the nursery where Jewish children were cared for before they were transported out of Amsterdam. My father asked her to also come and work in Het 'Apeldoornsche Bosch', the psychiatric asylum where Jews were supposedly safe. But Hella wanted to stay with the children. I don't have her picture, but for me she is this woman. I based this painting on a picture made in the nursery. In 1943 Hella was deported to Westerbork, together with the children. Shortly after, they were all

gassed in Sobibor. In the eyes of my father, she was a heroin. I was named after her.”



Father with alter ego, 2023

acrylic on canvas

Eli Asser (father)

“Through the conversations we had for the documentary ‘Don’t lose heart’, I learned to understand my father’s frenzied outbursts better. His screaming: “Clear away your own vomit!” when I vomited over the tiles as a fourteen-year-old, because I couldn’t stand the tension at our dinner table any longer. This painting shows both of my father’s faces. The traumatised father and the funny, celebrated writer. In the background, the war is ever present.”



Mother and great grandmother

acrylic on canvas

**Eva Asser-Croiset (mother), Eva Miller-Cohensius
(great grandmother)**

“In my mind I always see my mother grieving in front of her mother’s picture. When I came to understand this loneliness, I started a painting with her as a little girl. In the background we see her grandmother. She was left with her like a doll by her mother. A doll became the symbol of innocence to me. The history of the war was a given in our family and it influenced my life too.”



Eva in the sea

acrylic on canvas

Eva Asser-Croiset (mother)

“Here, my mother stands in front of a burning city – an image that refers to the destroyed cities of Ukraine. In this way the past reaches out to the present for me: war is closing in again.”



Maggie on top of the World III, 2012

acrylic on canvas

Jork I, 2021

acryl and oil on canvas

“This Virgin Mary is inspired by a Christmas card I received. While painting, I sensed it was our son Jork in the arms of Mary. Souls that never found a resting place during The Second World War hover over them. In the painting they find a place. At seven years old our granddaughter Maggie died of a hereditary heart condition.

It is intensely sad that our daughter Roos also has to find a way through this heart breaking grief. In this painting I tried to capture Maggie’s dreamy look. She was very wise and taught me how to be a grandmother. To be the grandmother I never had.”

[Letter to Etty]

What does Etty Hillesum mean to me?

In 1974, I was 24 at the time, our three month old baby had died in his pram during our trip to Texel. Out of the blue. Complete desperation. I wanted and needed to see my mother. Find comfort, hold her against me. When I stood before her, all she could utter was: "One baby is nothing in comparison to the hundreds we lost in the war." It was the final blow. My mother had abandoned me. I lost control. Until I read, seven years later, *An interrupted life: the diaries and letters of Etty Hillesum 1941-1943*, published in 1981. A new reality opened up before me. She described how her beloved, her Spier, inspired her and showed her sides of life she knew nothing about. I felt supported, because I also had such a phenomenon at my side.

My husband, my brilliant friend, my beloved. But Freek and I were trapped in our own world at the time. I, a girl from a Jewish family with parents who survived the war because they went into hiding, while the rest of their family was murdered in concentration camps, and who kept fighting against the outside world that looked away and didn't understand. So narrow-minded that even I, their own daughter posed a threat. Freek, coming from a protestant Christian family where trust and love was preached. At the time his career was all consuming so after three months the baby wasn't entirely his child yet. Jork, that's how we named the little fellow, felt still part of my body after nine

months inside of me and only three months in the world.

Reading the book I felt a connection. In my mind's eye I saw Etty, sitting on a mat, meditating in the concentration camp hell. She could withdraw from the misery by keeping close to her pure soul. After reading her book, 38 years after she had left the earth, murdered in Auschwitz, all I could say to myself was: "What have I to complain about? I am alive, I have a beautiful two-year old daughter, a wonderful husband and my life is not in danger!" For me she was resurrected. Her inner strength filled me with courage. I discovered there was not a second to lose, I had to change course: I had to be there for my daughter! Etty taught me to search for love, to find and to share it.

I learned to trust just being. She was right next to me when I sat on my mat, cross-legged, arms in the air, palms together, pointing to a nameless God. All the while she seemed to whisper to me: that's the way, you can do it, pass it on. And I did. The day after my mother was buried in 2002, I wrote it all down in a notebook. I once made a deal with the publisher of her diaries that he would be the first to read it when I had finished writing my story, based on the idea that if I could inspire three people my mission was accomplished. It was a success. In 2006 *Los van de wereld* appeared. Partly due to her visions.

Her inspiration is still needed today, because sadly we haven't learned much from the past. Peace is still horribly shattered. Children from Gaza, Ukraine, Sudan or any other warzone are killed or pursued. How can they ever, after all they have seen and experienced, raise their children? How can we in the future offer comfort to these children? Show them the way to love? I hope I can continue painting and sharing for a long time. Grateful for the visions of Etty Hillesum.



The scream, 2026

acrylic on canvas, string and doll

“In this work, I have tried to express the feeling of a scream. But also the question: am I allowed to be? In wars, generations of children grow up bearing the consequences. The child, the doll, is innocent. Children are not allowed to be in wartime. Afterwards, they have to fight, to free themselves of the traumas that formed their parents and themselves. I have tried my utmost to keep my traumas away from my children, for them to grow up in happiness.”



A sympathetic ear, 1994

bronze

Rebirth, 1994

bronze

“When I started out as a sculptor, I made several sculptures, trying to express the closed in feeling I often had. Always having to be the sympathetic ear for instance, without any room for me. In ‘Rebirth’ you can see this struggle, withdrawing from the uncomfortable form you were forced into, but in which you don’t feel at home.”

[Gallery text]

War and repression

Hella fights injustices. This takes the form of paintings, books and documentaries. She fights for instance for equality between men and women in health issues, when she realizes the medical world takes no interest in the specific differences between male and female heart conditions. In her paintings of refugees and women’s oppression she wants to emphasize womanpower.

Images of recent wars merge in her paintings with images of The Second world War. Hella finds recurrences in themes: the loss of innocence, the suffering of children. In many of her works she

condemns the misery people subject each other to, then and now.



Present and past I, 2022

acrylic on canvas

“This painting, I simply had to paint. It was the day after Russia invaded Ukraine. How will this Ukrainian girl process everything she has seen and been put through? How will she raise her children? On the right we see the famous picture of Settela Steinbach, the Sinti girl who was filmed when she was deported to Auschwitz by the Nazis, merged with a woman in a headscarf. How is it possible that people refuse to learn from the past, and hate and revenge is still omnipresent?”



Afghanistan I, 2021

acrylic on canvas

Afghanistan II, 2021

acrylic and oil on canvas

“These paintings are a reaction to the Taliban taking over power in Afghanistan. Women lost their freedom and that angers me. They have to cover themselves up, because men want to hide their beauty. But female shapes remain visible. The women do not avert their eyes under their burqa. They are powerful and keep looking at us. The running woman tries to save her child, but fails. There will also be a generation of children there who are repressed.



Refugee I, 2022

acrylic on canvas

“When Russia invaded Ukraine, Russian refugees also came to our country. A story of a Russian dancer inspired me for this work. She had to flee the war, because she didn’t agree with the actions of her fatherland. Here she is safe, here she can dance.”



Refugee III, 2023

acrylic on canvas



Resurrection I, 2023

acrylic on canvas

“In 2015, a photo of a Syrian boy made headlines around the world. Three-year-old Aylan Kurdi drowned while fleeing to Europe. The image of the dead boy washed ashore, lying face down, shocked many people. It took me back to the moment I found our son Jork dead in his stroller. In the painting, I gave Aylan a guardian angel. We will not forget him.”



Refugee II, 2022

acrylic on canvas

“In 2022 Russia invaded Ukraine. We saw horrible footage of thousands of fleeing people. Children pushed into trains. The night after the invasion I dreamed I was somewhere on a platform in Poland. Surrounded by thousands of people who pushed, pulled and yelled. Suitcases flying through the air. Grasping hands. I woke in a sweat. For the first time, I realised how deep the fear of flight was imbedded in me. I am disturbed by the idea that the people who have to flee now, will transfer that fear to their children.



Resilience, 2024

acrylic and oil on canvas, embroidery

“I often start a painting with an image I have in my head. I saw the destruction in Gaza and wanted to express the power of creativity. The world around this woman collapses, but she keeps playing. Initially this wasn’t supposed to be a self-portrait, but that’s what it turned out to be. Creativity has been my lifeline: drawing, painting, endlessly playing the violin and dancing till I dropped.”



Ukraine III, 2024

oil on canvas, fabric

Ukraine I, 2025

acrylic and oil on canvas, ceramics

Ukraine II, 2025

acrylic and oil on canvas, fabric

“While working on these paintings, my thoughts were with the most vulnerable: children and the elderly. Parents often cannot flee with their children. They would rather stay where they are because they feel responsible, for a farm for instance. That reminded me of my father, who asked his father to go into hiding. My grandfather answered that he would do what the Germans asked of him. Shortly thereafter my father’s parents and sister were captured and murdered in Auschwitz.



The tunnel
acrylic on canvas



Girl with flower, 2023
acrylic on canvas



Hunted, 2025
oil and acrylic on canvas, wood and ceramics



View

oil on canvas

“Images for paintings pop up in my head, and I transfer them to canvas. Sometimes, I also use my ceramics to build a painting. This series concerns Gaza. I cannot understand the amount of hatred and feelings of revenge as a result of which ‘the other’ is no longer perceived as a human being. Images of crowds at places where food is distributed, break my heart. Using famine as weapon is horrific. In this painting an Israeli soldier views what he has wrought. Destruction and persecution. He is anonymous, completely packed away in his uniform. But on his chest you see a child.”



Food distribution, 2025

oil and acrylic on canvas, doll

[Quote]

"I feel powerless, but when I paint, I hope to do justice to injustice."



Trust, 2026

acrylic on canvas, ceramics, fabric