

Unknown Artist, *Portrait of Henk Krijger*, ca. 1965, photograph.

Artist Henk Krijger

Hendrik (Henk) Krijger was born in 1914 to Christian missionaries in the colony of the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia). He was born and spent his early years in Karuni, a small village on the island of Sumba. We do not know very much about his early years, although we do know that Indonesian culture had a lifelong impact on his artistic style.

In 1928 at the age of fourteen, Krijger moved to Amsterdam in the Netherlands to pursue his education. He was formally trained in book design, typography, illustration, and type-design. Krijger pursued many kinds of fine art-making, including painting, drawing, collage, jewelry design, sculpture, and mural making.

Krijger lived through World War II in Amsterdam, experienced Nazi occupation, and participated in the Resistance. After the war, he moved to North America, living in both Chicago and Toronto. In America, he worked at the Institute of Christian Art in Chicago, which later relocated to Toronto under Krijger and others' leadership as the Patmos Institute. Much of Krijger's work explores his relation to and belief in Christianity, which was often relayed subtly and through symbolism. Krijger also created artwork related to themes of mythology, literature, and everyday life, as well as some works in response to World War II. He created a sculpture in the Netherlands celebrating the millionth home built after the destruction of the war.

Krijger returned to the Netherlands in 1973, and remained there until his death in 1979.

The GVSU Art Museum holds the largest public collection of Krijger's art.

Nazi Occupied Netherlands

In 1940, Nazi forces invaded the Netherlands despite their declared neutrality. After five days, the Dutch government surrendered and Nazi occupation of the Netherlands began. For the first year, the Nazi occupying forces took a “velvet glove” approach, treating the Dutch well and enhancing the economy. They did however immediately outlaw many political groups and implemented *gleichschaltung*, or “enforced conformity”. By June 1941, the pressures of the war and need for supplies meant that the Nazi occupiers began to make greater demands, and the velvet glove was removed. The standard of living declined, the Dutch began to experience repression, and the Jewish people living in the Netherlands were sent to concentration camps. In 1941, when the first group of Jewish people were sent to the Mauthausen-Gusen and Buchenwald Concentration Camps, the Dutch reacted quickly with the February Strike. Organized by the illegal Communist party, over 300,000 Dutch citizen participated, effectively shutting Amsterdam down. The strike itself only lasted two days, with the occupying Nazi forces responding quickly, employing violence to quell the strike. This is considered to be the first and only large-scale protest over Nazi treatment of the Jewish people, although it inspired other smaller strikes across Europe.

De Bezige Bij

While living in Nazi-occupied Amsterdam, Krijger worked in book design and printing. He began to work for De Bezige Bij (The Busy Bee), an illegally founded publishing house that published resistance materials that raised money for displaced children. When the Nazis began to send the Jewish citizens of Amsterdam to concentration camps, they first sent them to Hollandsche Schouwburg, a theatre. There was a school across the street, and many Jewish children were successfully hidden in the school to save them from deportation. The Children’s Fund was established to raise money to help support these children. The founder of De Bezige Bij, Geertjan Lubberhuizen, was a member of the Children’s Fund and helped hide around 300 Jewish children. The first poem De Bezige Bij published was ‘De Achttien Dooden’ (‘The Eighteen Dead’), which commemorated the eighteen men executed by the Nazis following the February Strike. For some time, the illegal publication was printed in an attic. As a designer, typographer, and illustrator, Krijger helped to create the materials that were published and disseminated to raise funds for Jewish children and to spread anti-Nazi messages.

Hongervinter 1944-1945

From 1944-1945, Dutch citizens, including Krijger, experienced the *Hongervinter*, or the Hunger Winter. Due to the consequences of a six-week Nazi food embargo from September-October 1944, combined with crop failures, lack of transport or adequate roads and bridges, and a harsh winter, millions of people in the Netherlands starved. During this time, Krijger helped to smuggle potatoes into Amsterdam, where the average adult was living on less than 1000 calories a day. Estimates say that between 16,000 - 22,000 people died of starvation during the *Hongervinter*. This period of starvation ended when the Allied forces liberated the Netherlands.

The Survivors

Take a moment to look at *The Survivors* on the next page. This work was created in 1972, the year before Krijger returned to the Netherlands. As you look, ask yourself:

- What do you notice about the faces and bodies of the figures?
- What kind of techniques did Krijger use?
- Who do you think the survivors are?

The survivors could be either those who survived the Nazi concentration camps or those who survived the *Hongervinter*. Here he paints four figures with gaunt faces, ribs showing, bodies cut into different sections, with eyes that confront us as we look at them. Despite their malnourished frames, all of the figures are standing tall. The trials and adversity these figures faced has not defeated them.

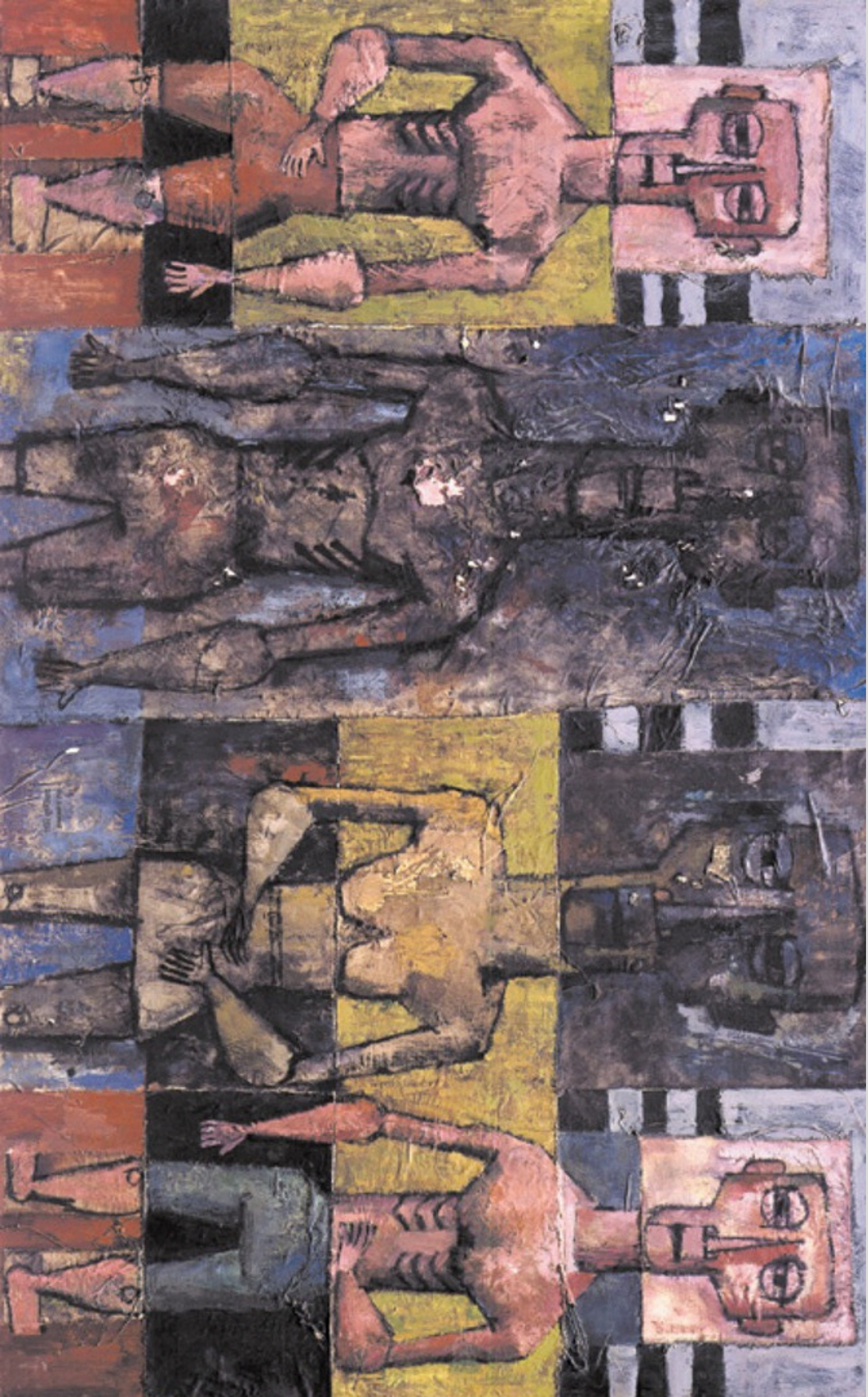
Krijger was influenced by the Indonesian totems he saw while growing up. Look up Indonesian totems and compare them and Krijger's figures. In what ways can you see how Krijger was influenced?

Prompt

As you consider your entry for the Henry Pestka Art and Poetry Contest, first remember that the Holocaust was a real experience; millions of people, both Jewish and non-Jewish, died due to government policy. We honor the survivors, and do not want to trivialize their experiences, even unintentionally. As you think about your poem or art piece, remember that your piece should be respectful of those real experiences.

Henk Krijger's artwork is thought of as multi-media, which means his work was created using many different kinds of materials, such as paint, paper, clay, textiles, and more. In Krijger's work *The Survivors*, he used rags and oil paint on a wood panel. When you can see the work up close, you can see loose threads and how the rags were arranged together.

Can you create a multi-media work of art that remembers the Holocaust or honors survivors? One technique to experiment with is collage.



Henk Krijger, *The Survivors*, 1972, oil and rags on masonite, [2021.66.1](#)

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