

THE *NAZI DRAWINGS* OF MAURICIO
LASANSKY

BY
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In 1967 an artist named Mauricio Lasansky completed a group of drawings which dealt with the atrocities committed in mid-century Germany. Although done more than twenty years after World War II the *Nazi Drawings* are a furious and timeless indictment of the Holocaust. Called “eloquent” by Charlotte Willard in *Look Magazine* (Willard 1968), and “the most searing artistic representation of this episode” by Hennig Cohen in *The Reporter* (Cohen 1968), these works were considered so powerful that the Chicago Institute of Art eventually refused to show them.

As is the case with Goya's *Disasters of War* series, Lasansky's choice to address the general theme of human atrocity rather than comment specifically on some isolated historical event is partly responsible for the particularly forceful impact of the drawings (Cohen 1967). Equally responsible is Lasansky's personal connection to the theme. Although he had never been to a concentration camp or even to Germany, Lasansky had been touched by the Holocaust; he had lived under fascist rule, and had seen his share of atrocities first hand.

Although the artist down-played the role of aesthetics in the creation of the drawings, his

exceptional talents as a visual artist did in fact also act to charge the otherwise raw, cryptic, images. In order to understand how all these factors gave strength to the *Nazi Drawings*, one must examine Lasansky's personal history.

Mauricio Lasansky was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 1911. His parents were of Polish, Spanish, Indian, and Jewish decent. At a young age Lasansky displayed a talent for for the visual arts. He studied at the Superior School of Fine Arts in Buenos Aires. By the age of 22, he had become the director of the Free School of Fine Arts in Cordoba, Argentina. Some of his earliest prints deal with the social situation with which he was familiar at the time, the plight of the peasant in Argentina (Figures 1 and 2). Although, in the opinion of the author, these prints are technically somewhat timid, amateurish intaglios, they have a direct emotionally conceived power that is most certainly due to Lasansky pulling directly from his personal experience. Although his vocabulary was relatively limited at this point (lack of concern for 3-D space and objective rendering), Lasansky already displays an eloquence within his visual language. The power of these early works is also a result of his choice to deal with general subjects like famine and despair

rather than specific events. This generalization of theme makes the meanings of the prints more universal and accessible.

In 1943, Lasansky came to the United States on a Guggenheim Fellowship. He studied all the prints in the Metropolitan's collection and began working with William Stanley Hayter at his experimental print making studio *Atelier 17*. Here Lasansky learned to creatively use the burin (an engraving tool) and the textural possibilities of soft ground etching. This was a time of technical exploration when Lasansky was strongly influenced by other artists, namely William Stanley Hayter and Pablo Picasso (Zigrosser 1973) (Figures 3 and 4).

The works he created just after leaving New York to teach at the University of Iowa show a strong indebtedness to *Atelier 17*. They are powerful images with underlying socio-political content, indications of what was to come.

A series of prints done from 1946 to 1948 called *For an Eye an Eye* (Figures 5-8) begin to explore the theme of fascism and the atrocities that humans can commit against other humans under such governments. Lasansky had intimately experienced fascism in Argentina. Before Coming to the United

States, he had been politically active in opposition to the fascist government of Juan Peron, and had been physically accosted by Pro-Peron Forces. He had witnessed the shooting of a Pro-Peron demonstrator by other Pro-Peron demonstrators (so it could be blamed on Anti-Peron factions) and the brutal beating of an American journalist (Orman 1991). Lasansky had actually sent his family out of the country before him and was only himself allowed to leave because he had received the Guggenheim Fellowship.

Lasansky's first-hand experience of human aggression in a fascist system can be sensed in the *An Eye for an Eye* series. The figures gouge and tear at one another with a variety of sharp instruments. A strong mood of human self-destructiveness is created. The plates themselves are worked aggressively, almost brutally. Lasansky's passion for the copper plate approaches the level of his passion for the subject. The two now work in concert and the art works' strength both aesthetically and conceptually, becomes amplified. Again Lasansky has chosen to work with the general concept of self-destructiveness rather than some specific historical event like a Peron-sponsored execution. Because of this choice, the prints have a more universal, timeless meaning. They speak not only

of fascist Argentina but also of Nazi Germany and fascist Italy. The horrors committed in these countries during World War II were just beginning to be graphically revealed while these prints were being created.

At this time, Lasansky was also working on portraits in addition to his social themes. Again the strength of Lasansky's personal connection to his imagery is particularly apparent in these figurative works. The titles such as *My Wife*, *My Boy*, *My Daughter Marie Jimena* speak of this intimacy (Figures 9,10, and 11). Lasansky, however, claims these works are as universal in scope as his more political themes (*Intaglios* 1959). Although of individuals, they address general ideas, like the bond between father and son or husband and wife, as do his political works. The strength of these bonds for Lasansky can be sensed in the passion with which he creates the marks on the plates. The attention paid, and love given to every detail, is a metaphor for Lasansky's relationship with his family; a relationship one finds easy to empathize with when studying one of these works.

Sponsored by another Guggenheim fellowship, Lasansky lived in Spain during 1953 and 1954. This trip turned out to be extremely influential in

Lasansky's later work. He had always looked to Spanish artists, notably Picasso, Velasquez, and Goya, but the work inspired by this visit to Spain firmly established him as a follower of the Spanish tradition (*Mauricio Lasansky: Forty Three Prints* 1973). At this time, Spain was under the rule of the fascist government of Franco. Having grown up in Argentina and speaking Spanish, Lasansky was not really an outsider to Spanish culture. He was able to experience Spain first hand, as it were. He felt as if he were being watched and could sense the oppressive atmosphere created by the government (Orman 1991). He was once again a witness to the brutality of fascist leadership.

Two of his most strongly conceived works relate to this experience. So wrought with hatred for Franco that he could not sleep (Zigrosser 1960), Lasansky found some catharsis in creating *Espana* and *The Vision* (Figures 12 and 13). Both relate symbolically to the situation in Spain. The horse represents Spain of the past, animalistic and stupid. The rider is Spain of the present, confused, dazed, and riding precariously on Spain of the past. A hopeful, optimistic Spain of the future is symbolized by the woman and child.

Although these symbols are more specific than those in Lasansky's earlier socially thematic works,

they still present a relatively broad message. They deal not with specific events but with Lasansky's holistic expression of the plight of Spain at the time.

More notable than any symbolism, though, is the sheer power of these prints as visual images. Lasansky demonstrates here, as nowhere else, his ability to communicate in the visual language.

About five years after *Espana* and *The Vision*, Lasansky began work on the *Nazi Drawings* which were the climax of both his formal and iconographic development. Lasansky's long-standing hatred of fascism was further intensified by films of Nazi concentration camps that were surfacing in the mid 1950's. Although not a practicing Jew, Lasansky must have taken the Holocaust somewhat personally. Ethnically, he was of Jewish decent. His European relatives were probably killed in the war. He also had experienced anti-semitic sentiment first hand. Initially he was not hired by the University of Iowa because an administrator did not want to hire a Jew (Orman 1991).

Again, as in earlier work, Lasansky chooses in the *Nazi Drawings* to deal not with specifics, but to speak of the general concept of humanity's potential self-destruction. Lasansky writes:

"Dignity is not a symbol bestowed on man, nor does the word itself possess force. Man's dignity is a force and the only *modus vivendi* by which man and his history survive. When mid-century Germany did not let man live and die with this right, man became an animal. No matter how technologically advanced or sophisticated, when a man negates this divine right, he not only becomes self-destructive, but castrates his history and poisons our future. This is what the Nazi drawings are about." (Nazi Drawings 1968).

Thirty in number, the *Nazi Drawings* are life-sized compositions executed in lead pencil and red and brown washes. Elements of earlier images reappear, but are transformed through the immediacy of the media. The first five drawings are something of a prelude. Military figures in skull helmets (reminiscent of German visored military campaign hats) are introduced (Figure 14). These figures can be seen as the executioners of innocents in later drawings. In the sixth drawing, the helmet becomes a whole skeleton that engulfs its human wearer (Figure 15). The last traces of humanity in this executioner become obscured by the graphic representation of death.

The seventh through the twelfth drawings deal with images of prostitutes (Figures 16 and 17). Some are wearing the skull helmets. Others are being attacked by the skeleton figures. Similar to Grosz's representation of prostitutes, Lasansky's prostitutes, the products of moral decay, symbolize decadence and excess; however, in the *Nazi Drawings* Lasansky shows how they ironically become victims of the same same decadence from which they emerged.

The next nine drawing are various depictions of the slaughter of innocents, especially children (Figure 18). In the 22nd drawing, Lasansky deals with the unaiding witness of the established church which he found so unforgivable (Figure 19). While the bishop figures do not actually aid the executioners, they are equally guilty in their inaction. Lasansky may have felt especially connected to this aspect of the holocaust because his family had practiced Catholicism in Argentina. The face of the Pope in the drawings is actually a self-portrait (Orman 1991).

The 24th through the 26th drawings, the antithesis of the first six, are portraits of the victims, children screaming in utter terror and grief (Figure 20). The final drawing summarizes the theme of the drawings. A Hitler figure is shown castrating himself.

The blood in the drawing is not that of the victim but of the executioner himself. The inertia of the death forces unleashed by a society has ultimately resulted in the society's self destruction (Figure 21).

The real power of these drawings lies not in their narrative references but in their impact as visual statements. Like a great novelist who uses words to express heartfelt emotions and human truths, Lasansky expresses himself visually with lines, marks, shapes and forms. He has chosen to convey his message in drawing --visual pieces of art-- rather than any other way because the visual is the language in which Lasansky is most fluent. Were he to write about his feelings relating to the Holocaust, the message would probably be much more weakly expressed.

If one views the *Nazi Drawings* in terms of the history of the graphic arts (prints and drawings), they do not seem unusual. Historically, printmakers have frequently dealt with socio-political themes. Printmakers, through their drawings or prints, have commented on some aspect of their social situation using a figurative, somewhat objective visual vocabulary. The mainstream art world of the second half of the 1960s, however, was not terribly

sympathetic to this type of imagery. The fact that the *Nazi Drawings* were shown at the Whitney and the Philadelphia Museums among others and were critically well-received at this particular time in art history is some thing quite unusual.

One way to explain this seeming incongruity is to conclude that mainstream artistic thought was somewhat irrelevant to these drawings. Their passionate and direct emotional conception and their timeless theme allow them to transcend mere aesthetics. Lasansky said of the drawings, "Are the aesthetics good or bad? I did not care. I gave myself over to the service of a big idea" (Willard 1968).

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Figure 2: *Cena*, etching, 11"x13", 1937.

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Figure 19: #22, 74.25"x45.5".

Figure 20: #24, 43.5"x39.25".

Figure 21: #30, 56"x30".



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7

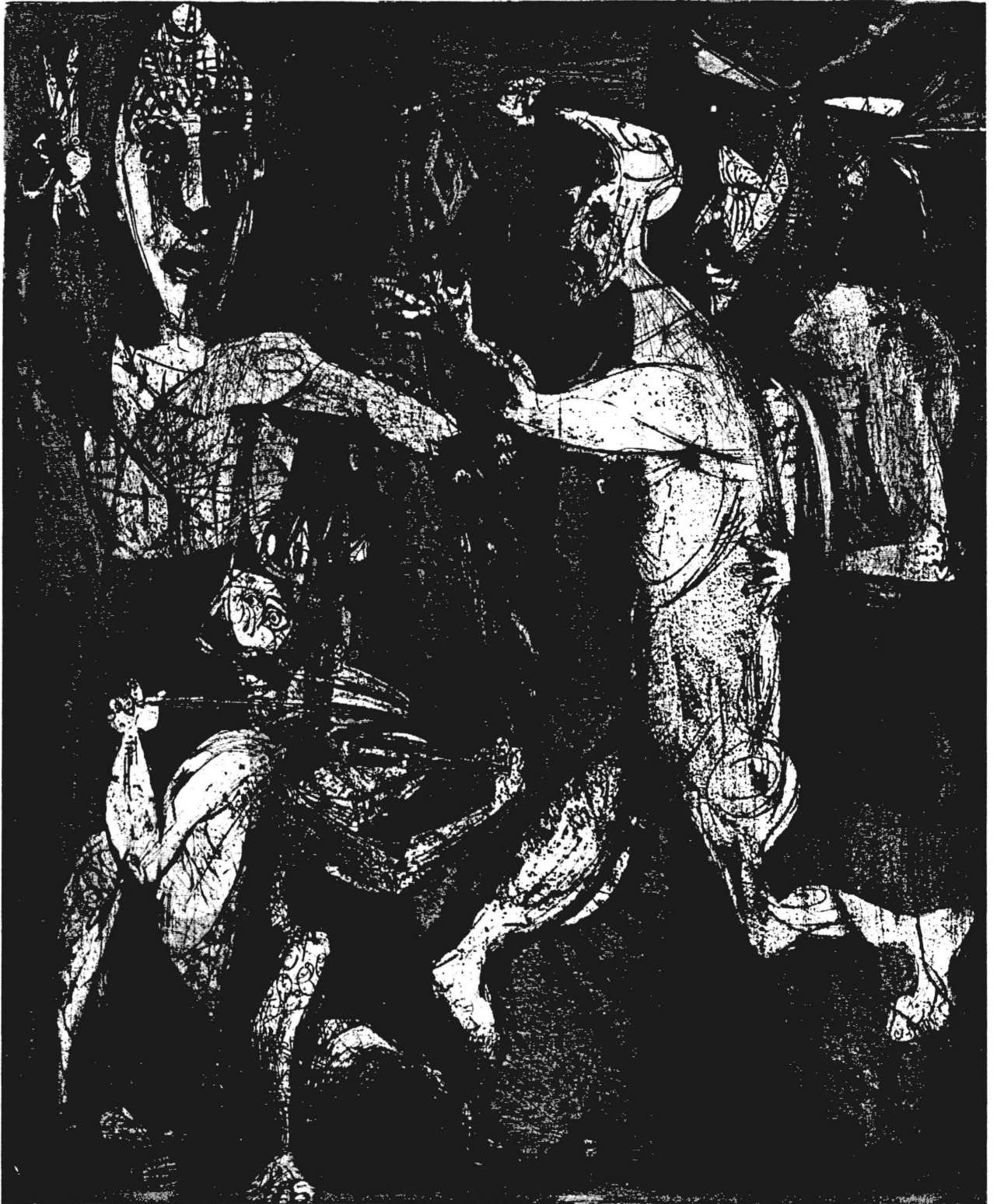


Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10

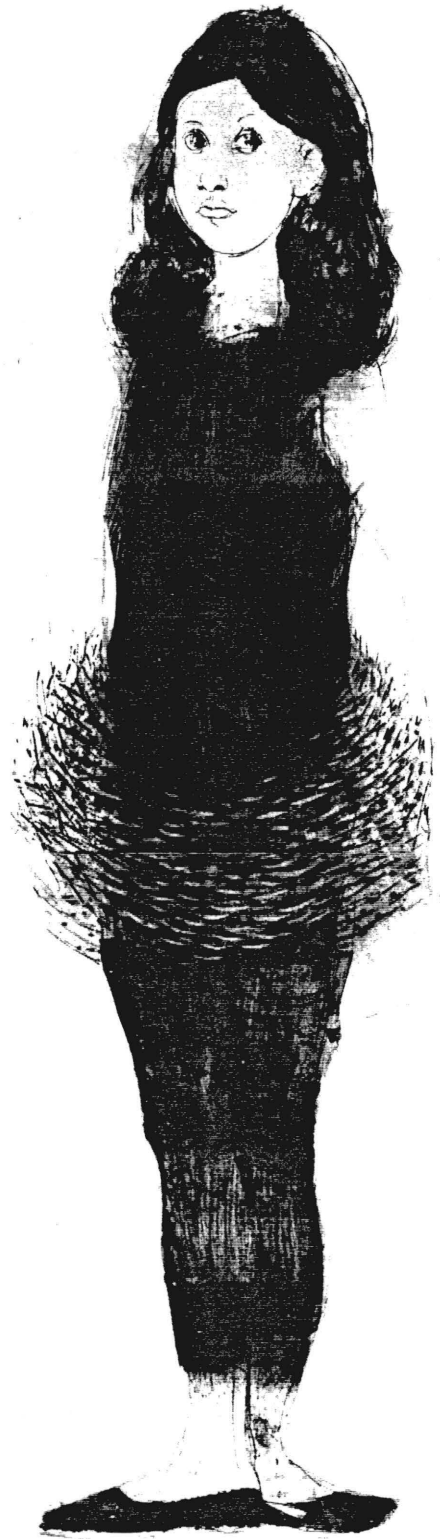


Figure 11



Figure 12



Figure 13



Figure 14



Figure 15

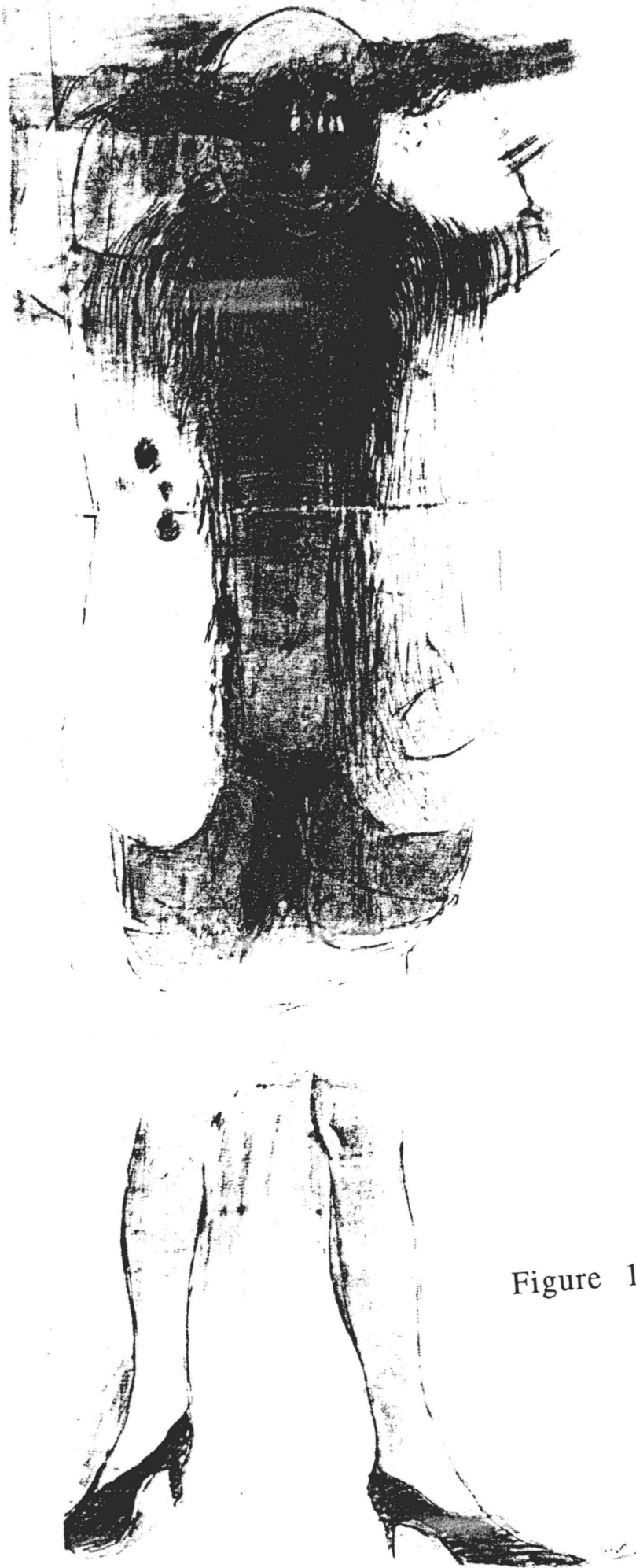


Figure 16



Figure 17

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Figure 18



Figure 19

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Figure 20



Figure 21