

# The Bureaucrat

Painting by Matan Ben Cnaan

Reading by David Grossman

Curator Amitai Mendelsohn

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Matan Ben Cnaan's monumental painting *The Bureaucrat* presents a dramatic moment involving a large crowd of women, men, and children in an open landscape. Despite the clear daylight and sharp realism, the meaning of this scene remains obscure. What is happening? Who is the "bureaucrat" standing at the center, clipboard in hand? Who is the woman facing him, her arms around the two girls? And what are they talking – or not talking – about?

The eminent Israeli author David Grossman took a long, hard look at this work and proposed a reading that scrutinizes details while offering a broad overview. In this encounter between a writer of words and a painter of pictures, two artists grapple with an enigmatic scene that is both collective and highly personal.

As with other works by Ben Cnaan, *The Bureaucrat* was created in stages. First the artist imagined the composition, after which he meticulously orchestrated the scene he had in mind and photographed it from different angles. Then he returned to his studio and turned the pictures into a painting. The setting he chose to stage his scene one fine morning is an open area southeast of Tel Aviv, near the Hiriya Park. There he assembled a large group of relatives, friends, and acquaintances and, as they took their places, he "directed" each one individually, explaining his or her role and motivation, in order to produce the overall mood he envisioned. Filmed scenes from that morning accompany the painting in the gallery space.

But long before then, the painting's visual starting point was a rare image that Ben Cnaan came across during a visit to Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. This photograph of Jews at the entrance to the Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp in 1944 includes a man wearing only one shoe, a woman holding a baby, and a small basket of food in the foreground – all three also appear in the painting. Thus a picture documenting the most horrifying episode in Jewish history gave rise to this vista of people standing in the warm Israeli sunlight against a serene background of fields and trees.

However, this is not Ben Cnaan's only visual influence. *The Bureaucrat* alludes to a whole canon of Western paintings portraying historical, mythological, and religious subjects, as well as everyday life. Notable among these is Gustave Courbet's transformative masterpiece *A Burial at Ornans* (1849–50), a monumental canvas devoted to a provincial funeral among ordinary

people. At the open grave we see clergymen and altar boys, mourners and townsfolk from different social classes, painted in an uncompromisingly realistic style. Unlike the romantic, dramatic paintings of his period, Courbet's work portrays death not as something filled with grandeur, but as prosaic and melancholy. Despite the clerical presence and the crucifix being held aloft, there is nothing spiritually sublime about the scene. Similarly, the vast tableau in *The Bureaucrat* is peopled by everyday rather than mythic figures, even if a feeling of dramatic suspense hangs over their gathering. Courbet painted an actual funeral that he witnessed, while Ben Cnaan staged a scene that he imagined, but both employ a precise, realistic visual language to convey a moment whose significance goes far beyond what is visible.

Matan Ben Cnaan was born in Ramat Yishai in northern Israel in 1980 and received his BA from the Oranim College of Education, Kiryat Tivon, and his MFA from the University of Haifa. In 2015 he became the first Israeli to win the prestigious BP Portrait Award at the National Portrait Gallery, London.