

Press Release
Zurich, 6 December 2007

The Kunsthaus Zürich presents an exhibition of drawings and prints by the caricaturist Honoré Daumier.

From 7 December 2007 to 24 February 2008, the Kunsthaus Zürich will show some 70 drawings and prints by Honoré Daumier (1808-1879). The cabinet exhibition observes life in the worldly French capital, depicts the antics of street entertainers, and presents Daumier's illustrations for the 'Don Quixote' of Cervantes, as well as various other literary products of a restless, revolutionary age, the breeding-ground for the 19th century's most innovative and prolific draughtsman.

FACES OF THE ROOTLESS METROPOLITAN

Daumier mulled over issues of immediate topical relevance. His so-called 'têtes d'expression' (facial expressions) provide a key to both his oeuvre and the exhibition at the Kunsthaus. Here is the everyday life of petty bourgeoisie and tradesmen, at work, at leisure, and travelling by railroad; here are jugglers and buskers, critics, art collectors, lawyers and judges. Theirs are the symbolic faces of the rootless metropolitan, on the run from banality and in constant quest of a little diversion. Daumier aims to make visible the cracks in the modern metropolis by way of figures with an allegorical turn, borrowed in part from reality, in part from literature or his own imagination: fleeing migrants; a lone child, awed by the spectacle of a newly discovered world; a sad clown, an allegory of the artist; and scenes from 'Don Quixote'.

COME TO THE EXHIBITION AND LOOK OVER THE ARTIST'S SHOULDER

For Daumier, drawing was a means to understanding what made the modern world tick. He was aided in this pursuit by his extraordinary feeling for the reproduction of facial expressions, attitudes and gestures by means of lines, as well as by his capacity for conjuring up space with light and shade, skills every bit as useful to him as his ability to evoke colours and ideas in the minds of those who viewed his black-and-white creations. Daumier drew all his figures from memory. Daumier, who revered the Old Masters, was himself a master of hand drawing, a medium in which he felt at home like no other. Delacroix, Corot, Millet and Rousseau all believed him to be the leading contemporary practitioner of the form. His technique was anything but academically correct. He would improvise from memory on ordinary paper, beginning by sketching in the main lines of a drawing with dry chalk or charcoal, before washing over them with a brush. The effect of this procedure was to create brilliant light and

deepest shadow, immortalised on paper in nuanced shades of grey. Finally, and with a decisive hand, he would use pen or conté crayon to fill in key accents.

Visitors to the exhibition will be initiated into the creative process that produced the 23 drawings Bernhard von Waldkirch has assembled, alongside 45 prints, three sculptures, a stone used to produce lithographs, and a painting. The curator's selection illustrates the relationship between drawings and watercolours, oils, prints and sculptures in Daumier's oeuvre. Viewers look over the artist's shoulder as he himself depicts it in 'Le dessinateur', something that would have been unthinkable in Daumier's own day, with its censors dogging the production of graphic works at every step.

FROM PORTRAITIST OF THE MIGHTY TO VICTIM OF CENSORSHIP

The son of a family of immigrants in southern France, Daumier ascended unusually quickly from his humble beginnings: he had arrived socially at the tender age of 21, when he began to caricature the delegates of the National Assembly, the king and his ministers. The chaos of the July Revolution gave him overnight celebrity: he was suddenly the toast of Paris, and a name to make the mighty tremble. A lithograph in which he portrayed Louis-Philippe, styled the Citizen King, as the insatiable giant Gargantua, from Rabelais's novel of that name, earned Daumier six months in prison for lèse majesté in 1831; and, when political cartooning was banned by the July monarchy in 1835, Daumier abandoned the form to turn increasingly to social satire. During the first two years of his career he supported himself almost solely on the proceeds of his popular journalism – not without risk, as proven in 1860 when he was 'let go' for three years in the wake of the reintroduction of censorship of the press.

IGNORED AS A FREELANCE ARTIST DURING HIS LIFETIME

He kept his head above the water as a freelance artist, creating works for a small group of amateur collectors. Although Daumier was ignored for this work and his collectors were marginalised in their own day, those same patrons have bequeathed to posterity the majority of the drawings extant today, dated by the experts to the 1860s.

Daumier worked in the key media of the 19th century, and although the technique of oil painting drove him to despair, he was able to make a virtue of necessity and reach a significant milestone thirty years before Degas and Cézanne: he discovered the charm of the unfinished composition, which was to enter the annals of art history as a new aesthetic paradigm. He was also active as a sculptor, and his moustachioed 'Ratapoil' (1851), the political face of Bonapartism, is recognised to this day as one of the progenitors of modern sculpture. During his lifetime, however, Daumier never saw the fruits of his success as a freelance artist. Success did not come until the 20th century. Today his drawings are among the most sought-after collector's items in European art.

PUBLICATION

The exhibition is accompanied by a book, in which Bernhard von Waldkirch displays and annotates heads, figures and portraits, treats individual motifs such as lawyers, tumblers and buskers, writes about mobility and employment, the delights of leisure and, last but not least, how its viewers, yawning with ennui or nodding in recognition, have received Daumier's art. The book, published by Hirmer Verlag of Munich, contains 118 pages with 46 colour illustrations. It is available at the Kunsthaus shop for CHF 46.-.

VISITOR'S INFORMATION

Kunsthaus Zürich, Heimplatz 1, 8001 Zurich, www.kunsthaus.ch

Admission incl. collection CHF 12.-/8.- (concessions)

Public guided tour of the exhibition with curator Bernhard von Waldkirch: 17 January and 7 February at 6.30 p.m.

Private guided tours can be arranged upon request by phoning 044 253 84 84 (Mon-Fri 9 a.m.-12 noon).

New opening hours as of 2008!

2007: Tues-Thurs 10 a.m.-9 p.m., Fri-Sun 10 a.m.-5 p.m. 26 December 10 a.m.-5 p.m.

2008: Sat/Sun/Tues 10 a.m.-6 p.m., Wed/Thurs/Fri 10 a.m.-8 p.m. 1/2 January 10 a.m.-6 p.m.

Closed on Mondays.

Advance sales in Switzerland, France and Belgium

Switzerland: RailAway/SBB Kombi-Ticket, with reduction on rail travel and entrance to the museum. Available at local stations and by phoning Rail Service: 0900 300 300 (CHF 1.19 per min.), group rates possible. Magasins Fnac, tel. +33 1 4157 3212, www.fnac.ch.

France: Magasins Fnac, Carrefour, tel. 0892 684 694 (EUR 0.34 per min.), www.fnac.com

Belgium: Magasins Fnac, tel. 0 900 00 600 (EUR 0.45 per min.), www.fnac.be

For further press information and visual material, please contact

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