

Press Release
Zurich, 4 October 2007

Kunsthhaus Zürich shows 'Félix Vallotton. Idyll on the Edge'

From 5 October 2007 until 13 January 2008 Kunsthhaus Zürich will be showing 90 paintings by Félix Vallotton. A Swiss avant-garde painter in close contact with the Nabis, Vallotton distinguished himself from his contemporaries with his ironic portrayal of socially-critical themes. And in so doing he neither shied away from acerbic allusions nor did he seek to preserve the veneer of the bourgeois idyll. Many of his works already anticipate certain formal elements that would later feature importantly in Surrealism, New Objectivity and Pittura Metafisica.

Félix Vallotton (1865–1925) was regarded as a keen observer of his own time. Only a member of the bourgeoisie by marriage, he treated bourgeois convention with critical irony. His razor sharp 'body portraits', considered beyond the pale by many of his contemporaries, made his name as an internationally renowned artist. Born in Lausanne, he studied in Paris and was in close contact with the artist's group known as the Nabis for some years. He worked as an illustrator for avant-garde journals and wrote plays which were, like his art, occasionally characterised by mordant sarcasm and black humour. The exhibition in the Kunsthhaus turns the spotlight on the paintings by Vallotton that take the viewer aback, as much today as they ever did.

INTERIORS AND ADULTERY

Vallotton's symbolic visual language often takes him into the realms of psychoanalysis – particularly in his portrayal of relations between the sexes, as in his painting 'La visite' (1899). In what could easily be a scene from a socially critical drama by Ibsen or Strindberg, a society lady is seen blatantly visiting her lover's apartment. As in other interiors, the frozen, static nature of the situation is shot through with crackling tension.

REVELATIONS WITH PHOTOGRAPHIC ACCURACY

The largest group of works selected for this exhibition consists of portraits of female nudes in stylised surroundings. Vallotton's unprettified depictions of the naked female body – not disguising a mild squint, unevenly formed breasts, or a low hairline – were unsettling to many of his contemporaries. Although one of the few avant-garde painters to be inspired by the Classicists, he was not entirely beholden to them: his view of the human form was cooler and less forgiving, his colours were more synthetic and his figures more natural, far from 'ideal' in both their poses and proportions. An inclination towards deformity? Above all an attempt to portray the female subject as an individual in her own right.

IRONY ON THE GRAND SCALE

This exhibition is the first occasion that such a wide selection of Vallotton's large-format 'mythological paintings' has been presented to the viewing public. In these 'grandes machines', as he himself called them, Vallotton takes up and reinterprets mythological themes such as 'Persée tuant le dragon' (1910). His figures have modern make-up and hair, the dragon has become a crocodile, and instead of a beautiful damsel chained to a rock, we see an emancipated twentieth-century woman viewing the struggle between the man and the monster with almost sullen disinterest. In contemporary society the battle of the sexes was very much an issue, but convention dictated that it was largely kept under wraps. Thus the impact of Vallotton's ruthlessly direct exposure and depiction of the theme must have been – and still is – all the greater.

MAGIC REALISM IN LANDSCAPES AND STILL LIFES

While the still life, also represented in this exhibition, is traditionally more innocuous, in Vallotton's hands even this genre can appear disturbingly artificial. Next to the gleaming, polished-looking 'Poivrons rouges' (1915) on a virginal white table lies a knife mottled with red. Is this blood, or just a reflection of the red pepper? Vallotton reveals even as he conceals. Deserted landscapes composed from clearly defined colour fields and abrupt light-dark contrasts leap out at the viewer. Elements that were still sacred to the Impressionists – light, nature, and the scientific analysis of the colour spectrum – are swept from view by Vallotton. He dissects his subjects with his gaze and creates a unique atmosphere for the motifs that he places centre stage. In both his techniques and presentation he importantly anticipates aspects of Surrealism, New Objectivity and Pittura Metafisica.

THE HISTORY OF THE EXHIBITION AND THE CATALOGUE

More than forty years have gone by since a solo exhibition acquainted the public with Félix Vallotton as one of the leading Swiss Symbolists in the early days of modernity. He has long been well represented with important paintings in the collection of Kunsthaus Zürich. In 1909 the first solo exhibition of his work was put on by the Kunsthaus; young people were not admitted to the exhibition because the nudes were deemed too offensive. It was during the 1909 exhibition that the Zürcher Kunstgesellschaft bought its first Vallotton. Since then a further 20 paintings by Vallotton have come to the Kunsthaus. These are seen in the exhibition in the company of another 70 important loans from leading museums in Switzerland and abroad; in addition to this there are also numerous rarely seen works from private collections. Curated by Kunsthaus Director Christoph Becker and art historian Linda Schädler, the exhibition will subsequently travel to the Hamburger Kunsthalle (15 February to 18 May 2008). More in-depths

information in German, French and English is available on the exhibition website and in the catalogue 'Felix Vallotton. Idyll on the Edge' with essays by the curators, 208 pages and 90 full-colour illustrations. The catalogue is on sale in the Museum Shop for CHF 49.- and in bookshops (Verlag Scheidegger & Spiess).

Supported by Banca del Gottardo.

EVENTS

A series of lectures on Félix Vallotton (running from 24 October to 21 November) will be jointly presented by the Volkshochschule Zürich and Kunsthaus Zürich (www.vhszh.ch). And from 6 October 2007 to 28 September 2008, the Villa Flora in Winterthur will be featuring 'Félix Vallotton in der Villa Flora', an exhibition that investigates the historical background of the Hahnloser Family, collectors and patrons of the arts, and explores their friendship with Félix Vallotton (www.villflora.ch).

VISITOR INFORMATION

Kunsthaus Zürich, Heimplatz 1, 8001 Zurich

2007: Tues–Thurs 10 a.m.–9 p.m., Fri–Sun 10 a.m.–5 p.m., closed on Mondays
Public holidays: 25 December closed, 26 December open 10 a.m.–5 p.m.

New Opening Times for 2008: Sat/Sun/Tues 10 a.m.–6 p.m., Wed–Fri 10 a.m.–8 p.m., closed on Mondays. Public holidays: 1/2 January 10 a.m.–6 p.m.

Admission: CHF 17.-/11.- (concessions) incl. audio guide (German/French/English). Groups of 20 or more: CHF 13.- per head.

Groups and school classes must register in advance

Public guided tours: Tues 12.15 p.m., Wed 6.30 p.m., Fri 3 p.m., Sun 11 a.m.

Private guided tours: please call +41 (0)44 253 84 12 (Mon–Fri 9 a.m.–noon)

Exhibition website: www.kunsthaus.ch

Recorded information: Tel. +41 (0)44 253 84 97

Advanced sales

Switzerland: RailAway/SBB Kombi-Ticket, with reduction on rail travel and entrance to the exhibition, at SBB stations and by calling Rail Service: 0900 300 300 (CHF 1.19 per min.), www.railaway.ch. Group rates also available.

Magasins Fnac, Tel. +33 1 4157 3212, www.fnac.ch

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

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

For further information and visual materials, please contact

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Félix Vallotton. Idylle am Abgrund
Kunsthhaus Zürich
5. Oktober 2007 bis 13. Januar 2008



Félix Vallotton
 Le bain au soir d'été, 1892/93
 Öl auf Leinwand, 97 x 131 cm
 Kunsthhaus Zürich
 Leihgabe der Gottfried Keller Stiftung



Félix Vallotton
 Marthe Mellot, 1898
 Öl auf Leinwand, 73 x 60 cm
 Kunsthhaus Zürich
 Vereinigung Zürcher Kunstfreunde



Félix Vallotton
 Intérieur fauteuil rouge et figures, 1899
 Gouache auf Karton, 46,5 x 59,5 cm
 Kunsthhaus Zürich
 Geschenk von Otilie Roederstein, 1920



Félix Vallotton
 Intérieur avec femme en rouge de dos, 1903
 Öl auf Leinwand, 93 x 71 cm
 Kunsthhaus Zürich
 Vermächtnis Hans Naef



Félix Vallotton
 Le chapeau violet, 1907
 Öl auf Leinwand, 81 x 65,5 cm
 Villa Flora, Winterthur



Félix Vallotton
 Nu couché au tapis rouge, 1909
 Öl auf Leinwand, 73 x 100 cm
 Musée du Petit Palais, Genf



Félix Vallotton
 Persée tuant le dragon, 1910
 Öl auf Leinwand, 160 x 225 cm
 Musée d'art et d'histoire, Genf



Félix Vallotton
 Derniers Rayons, 1911
 Öl auf Leinwand, 100 x 73 cm
 Musée des beaux-arts, Quimper



Félix Vallotton
 Poivrons rouges, 1915
 Öl auf Leinwand, 46 x 55 cm
 Kunstmuseum Solothurn
 Dübi-Müller-Stiftung



Félix Vallotton
 La plage à Honfleur, 1919
 Öl auf Leinwand, 54 x 81 cm
 Privatbesitz



Félix Vallotton
 Nu sur fond jaune, 1922
 Öl auf Leinwand, 100 x 73 cm
 The Barrett Collection, Dallas TX



Félix Vallotton
 Le retour de la mer, 1924
 Öl auf Leinwand, 81 x 100 cm
 Musée d'art et d'histoire, Genf