

Press release
Zurich, 1 October 2009

Georges Seurat: Impressionist exhibition at the Kunsthaus Zürich

Under the heading 'Figure in Space', the Kunsthaus Zürich presents work by one of the fathers of modern art, Georges Seurat, from 2 October 2009 until 17 January 2010. A colleague of Paul Cézanne and Vincent van Gogh's, Seurat brought a scientific precision to bear on Impressionist painting. Where there was nothing but light and atmosphere he introduced rational dialogues between figures and the space surrounding them, as attested by the over 60 high-quality paintings and drawings the Kunsthaus Zürich has assembled from important public and private collections in London, Paris, New York and Washington.

FATHER OF POINTILLISM

Together with Cézanne, van Gogh and Paul Gauguin, Georges Seurat (1859-1891) is considered one of the 'fathers' of modern art. He was also the most original of France's avant-garde artists in the late 19th century. Seurat was born in Paris, and when he died an untimely death at the age of 31 he had provided Impressionism with a theoretical underpinning. Stimulated by the key discoveries of contemporary colour theories Seurat began to cover canvases with contiguous, schematically positioned dabs of pure colour. He was satisfied to allow these dots to take on form only in the eye of the beholder. This process, which would come to be known as 'Pointillism', soon inspired other artists, who recognized the merits of a technique that replaced individual brushstrokes with systematically painted dots, painstakingly applied to the canvas until it resembled a web of juxtaposed points. Artistic expression thus ceded its decisive place in the painting process to the eye, which in turn required agility and schooling to produce the optical effects desired.

FIGURE IN SPACE

Unlike van Gogh, Seurat was a recognized master during his own lifetime, with contemporary colleagues such as the Dutch painter and Gauguin fascinated by his choice of colours and his technique. Later generations, foremost among them the artists of the Bauhaus, raved about his unusual compositions and his imposition of geometry on figures and landscapes alike. His way with a figure in space played a key role in the French artist's career, and is the central theme of a show that comprises both drawn and painted works. Although Seurat claimed that the subject of his pieces was of only secondary importance to him, viewers and art historians alike have sensed the keen interest in his figures of an artist who created works with titles like 'Reclining Man' (1883-84), from the Fondation

Beyeler, and 'Woman with Bouquet, seen from behind' (1882-83), from another private Swiss collection. Seurat immortalized contemporary society with a cold eye in severely calculated compositions. While he may now and then have varied a particular figure, zooming in on it or combining it with a wide range of other human forms, yet he was always content to give his subjects an individual, isolated appearance, on occasion to the point of parody. His palette shows an elegant reserve. The effect on the viewer is of pleasing harmony – of an art bent on imposing calm even as it stimulates and challenges the sense of sight. The eye registers a faint vibration as it traces the scenery of such key oil studies as 'Final Study for 'A Sunday on La Grande Jatte' (1884), from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; 'The Morning Walk: Study for 'The Seine at Courbevoie' (1885), from the National Gallery in London; or 'Shade and Sunlight: Study for 'A Sunday on la Grande Jatte' (1884-85), on loan from the Foundation E.G. Bührle Collection, Zurich.

CIRCUS, LANDSCAPES AND THE EIFFEL TOWER

Seurat began his career with drawing, and he never abandoned the medium. The intensive encounter with the human form that would become so characteristic of the mature artist was already visible in his attempts as a student, while in later drawings he was to achieve a remarkable balance between figurative contingency and technical autonomy. Pencil lines woven densely across the paper cause the subject to emerge as something vague and floating, or perhaps to vanish entirely. Striking chiaroscuro effects play about his figures, accentuating them and lending them an otherworldly aura, as in 'At the Concert Européen' (1886-88), from New York's Museum of Modern Art. In Seurat's paintings, too, the representation of people in space is of central importance. Another spectacular masterpiece on show at the Kunsthaus is 'Circus' (1890-91), on loan from the Musée d'Orsay in Paris.

Works such as 'The Gardener' (c. 1882), from the Kunsthaus Zürich collection, and 'Stone Breaker and Wheelbarrow, Le Raincy' (1882-83), from The Phillips Collection, Washington, can be adduced to indicate a caesura in Seurat's creative career. While he had initially oriented his work to the thinking of groups like the *École de Barbizon*, to periods such as the Renaissance, or to fellow artists like Puvis de Chavannes, in these pieces Seurat suddenly began painting his subjects with a new technique and setting them in innovative compositions. This avant-garde rebellion would be lent further impetus in later works in which he repeated or varied forms and subjects within the same painting. Seurat transformed his pictorial space and the figures placed within it into a geometrical phenomenon, and thus followed his invention of Pointillism with further proof of his avant-garde mettle, as evinced in the brilliant 'Eiffel Tower' (1889), on loan to Zurich from the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. Artists such as the Italian Futurists, Fernand Léger and Le Corbusier were enthusiastic about their debt to Seurat, and helped continue his scientifically informed work in the 20th century.

EXHIBITION IN ZÜRICH AND FRANKFURT

Kunsthaus Director Christoph Becker, curator and organizer of such popular and successful exhibitions as 'Monet's Garden', 'Rodin' and 'Félix Vallotton: Idyll on the Edge', has together with Julia Burckhardt Bild assembled the retrospective for the Kunsthaus Zürich. It is to be hosted next by Frankfurt's Schirn (4 February to 9 May 2010).

ART EDUCATION

The exhibition is accompanied by a free audioguide as well as a talking book (CHF 29.-) and a catalogue, all in English, German and French. The publication (152 pages, 111 colour images, available for CHF 45.- at the Kunsthaus shop), by Hatje Cantz Verlag, contains essays by Christoph Becker, Julia Burckhardt Bild, Gottfried Boehm (University of Basel), the author Wilhelm Genazino (Frankfurt a. M.) and Michelle Foa (Tulane University).

From 27 October until 24 November 2009 the Volkshochschule Zürich presents a series of lectures entitled 'Georges Seurat – Figur im Raum'. The programme is available on www.volkshochschule-zuerich.ch.

A contribution to culture by Credit Suisse – Partner of the Kunsthaus Zürich.

GENERAL INFORMATION / GUIDED TOURS / ADVANCE SALES

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

Opening hours Sat, Sun, Tues 10 a.m.–6 p.m., Wed, Thurs, Fri 10 a.m.–8 p.m., closed on Mondays.

Christmas: 24 and 26 December 10 a.m.–6 p.m. Closed 25 December.

New Year: 31 December, 1/2 January 10 a.m.–6 p.m.

Admission incl. audioguide: CHF 18.- / concessions CHF 12.- / CHF 14.- per head for groups of 20 or more

Private tours can be booked on +41 (0)44 253 84 84 (Mon–Fri 9 a.m.–12 noon).

Advance sales/arrival by train. Switzerland: RailAway/SBB Kombi-Ticket, with 20% reduction on travel and entrance to the exhibition, at SBB stations and by phoning Rail Service: 0900 300 300 (CHF 1.19 per min.). 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.

Hotels and accommodation/food and drink: Zürich Tourism, www.zuerich.com.

Contact for media

Kunsthaus Zürich, Kristin Steiner, kristin.steiner@kunsthaus.ch, tel. +41 (0)44 253 84 13. Visual material available to download at www.kunsthaus.ch