

KUNSTHAUS ZÜRICH AND ZÜRCHER KUNSTGESELLSCHAFT (FOUNDED 1787)

SWITZERLAND'S OLDEST STILL-ACTIVE ART ASSOCIATION

Zurich's Kunsthaus was sired not by a flashy potentate, nor a warlord keen to fill his museum with booty; not by a self-regarding artist, nor a fanatical collector drooling over his massed treasures, but by a small company of fellow artists and aficionados that had been meeting regularly since 1787 to converse and express mutual solidarity.

The Künstlergesellschaft proper began to coalesce in 1794. Each member took turns contributing a work, either his own or another's, to a so-called 'painter's book', and in 1812 a loan was taken up for the purchase of premises to serve initially as clubhouse and restaurant. Then in 1818 international funds made it possible to acquire the city's main artistic attraction, 'Gessner's painting cabinet', with its 24 idyllic landscapes in gouache and a wide selection of drawings by Salomon Gessner.

In 1847, in the wake of a string of exhibitions organized by the Swiss art association since 1840, what had until then been known as the 'Künstlergüetli' was enhanced with the addition of a modest gallery wing by Gustav Albert Wegmann, the same architect who had designed the neighbouring Villa Tobler and the cantonal school. The federal government began to deposit works acquired with a significantly larger budget in the 'Künstlergüetli' in 1890, followed by the Gottfried Keller-Foundation in 1892.

The 'Künstlerhaus Zurich' association was founded in 1895 and opened a provisional salon for temporary exhibitions in Börsenstrasse. In the following year the 'Zürcher Kunstverein' and the 'Künstlerhaus Zürich' merged to create the 'Zürcher Kunstgesellschaft' and step up their efforts to build a proper museum.

The museum building on the Heimplatz and its architect, Karl Moser

The Lindengut, an estate that had been deeded to the city for public use by City Councillor Landolt-Mousson, a patron of the arts, offered an appropriate site for the new structure: on the Heimplatz, one of three squares (with the Paradeplatz and the Bahnhofplatz) marking the perimeter of the mediaeval town and the transition to its newer, up-and-coming suburbs. Following two architectural competitions, Karl Moser (1860-1936) was commissioned in 1903 to build a new Kunsthaus.

Moser, who came from Baden, shared an architectural firm with Robert Curjel in Karlsruhe. His Church of St. Paul in Basel, completed in 1900, catapulted him to the upper echelons of Swiss architecture. While his work in Zurich includes the university building and various churches, Moser's original design for the Kunsthaus, together with his meticulous realization of the project, is generally regarded as his masterpiece. The concept arose at a particularly felicitous juncture, when Moser was able to marry the abundant store of experience garnered during work on numerous museum buildings in the late 1800s, and the comforting solidity of the academic tradition in the design and proportioning of interiors, with the new freedom of floor plan and decoration afforded by Jugendstil; as early as 1900, however, the latter movement had already begun to eschew bombastic excesses in favour of a new formal severity. A comparison of the project submitted to the competition for the Kunsthaus with the architect's own execution, which was plainly under the influence of contemporary new works by Olbricht in Darmstadt and Joseph Hoffmann in Vienna, suggests Moser's progress to the creation of ideal rooms for the presentation of art.

The first Kunsthaus and its inauguration in 1910

On 17 April 1910 the Zürcher Kunstgesellschaft opened its new premises, whose name – the neologism 'Kunsthaus' – identified it as an institution committed to the democratic project in the tradition of the 'Rathaus' (town hall) and 'Schulhaus' (school house); accordingly, the Sechseläute parade held the next day was dedicated to the inauguration. Neither a museum nor an art gallery, but rather, as noted by Moser, both at once: such a double function was unusual at the time, and was to constitute the cachet of the Kunsthaus for a long time. The building's architecture is a further expression of its hybrid nature: the home of the collection, a monolithic construction reminiscent of an archaic treasury, contrasts with the vibrant, window-clad exhibition wing facing Rämistrasse. It was here that new Swiss painting, which featured Ferdinand Hodler, Cuno Amiet and Giovanni Giacometti as its chief proponents and was the recipient of growing respect throughout Europe, was to enjoy its full flowering. By the 1920s, however, for all its generous proportions, the building had become too small, and the series of extensions that followed has continued down to the present day: in 1925 (Karl Moser), 1958 (Pfister brothers), 1976 (Erwin Müller) and 2015 (David Chipperfield).