

Press release
Zurich, 25 February 2010

Kunsthaus Zürich shows Salomon Gessner

In an exhibition entitled 'Idyll in an Obstructed Landscape', to run from 26 February until 16 May 2010, the Kunsthaus Zürich presents the work of Zurich painter and poet Salomon Gessner. The show reconstructs Gessner's cabinet, which comprises 20 gouaches and watercolours and laid the cornerstone for the Kunsthaus collection in the first half of the 19th century. An additional 50 pieces from the museum's own collection and on loan from owners domestic and foreign round out the survey of Gessner's oeuvre.

Salomon Gessner (1730-1788) was celebrated during his lifetime for his art and poetry, the latter translated into more than 20 languages. In Europe and the Americas as well as in Russia, Armenia and the Caucasus, Gessner's 'Idylls', elegantly naïve tributes to the ideals of the Enlightenment, met with an enthusiastic reception. Gessner spent the better part of his life in Zurich, painting, writing, publishing, practising politics and raising a family, while his gouaches, watercolours, drawings and engravings made their way into the most renowned cabinets in Paris, St. Petersburg, Weimar and Vienna, among other places. Committed to a lyrical school of painting guided by the subjective experience of nature and independent study beyond the walls of the academy, Gessner had admirers and detractors in equal numbers.

REALITY AS POETRY

When Gessner died at the age of 57, just prior to the French Revolution, the idyll had been removed from its pedestal of timelessness, its staging ground shifted into the viewer's very self. Gessner imputed a creative unconscious to all of humanity, to dilettantes, mavericks and artists alike, and thus anticipated one of the findings of psychoanalysis: that our interpretation of reality as poetry is among the fundamental abilities and requirements of human consciousness, a function common to all who enjoy it, given sufficient leisure.

GESSNER'S CABINET OF WATERCOLOURS IN THE KUNSTHAUS ZÜRICH

Now, in his reconstruction of Gessner's once-celebrated Cabinet of Watercolours for the Kunsthaus show, curator Bernhard von Waldkirch affords contemporary viewers just such leisure. The exhibition, whose 70 pieces include 20 gouaches and watercolours as well as 17 hand drawings and engravings, is complemented by works on loan and provides a survey of Gessner's oeuvre. Zurich's first publicly accessible 'painting collection', the cabinet survived the Napoleonic Wars intact and in 1818 was presented by the city to the

Künstlergesellschaft, the predecessor of the Zürcher Kunstgesellschaft, as a permanent loan. A standing exhibition throughout the first half of the 19th century, it constituted the cornerstone of the Kunsthau Zürich's collection.

CHALLENGING THE PRECEPTS OF SYSTEMATIC LANDSCAPE PAINTING

Visitors are afforded fascinating insight into the minutiae of Gessner's cosmology. Self-taught, the painter contrived what he hoped would be a short cut on the royal road to eminence. His models for the realistic creation of a painting's foreground were drawn from no lesser Dutch masters than Nicolaes Berchem, Anthonie Waterloo and Jacob van Ruysdael. His ability to conjure an idyllic Arcadian ambience, meanwhile, Gessner owed to such major innovators of classical landscape painting as Nicolas Poussin and Claude Lorrain. At the same time, he broke with the systematic approach to landscape as propounded by the French academy and Germany's prolific and influential Jakob Philipp Hackert.

ARM IN ARM WITH LYRICALLY-MINDED VIEWERS

Gessner's profound admiration for the Old Masters sensitized him to states of mind, or moods, as evoked by such ordinary rural motifs as a stream bed. As the exhibition demonstrates to marvellous effect, this topos, together with moss-covered cliffs, symbolizes a gentle melancholy. The eye of viewers susceptible to lyricism is silently guided over picturesque wooden bridges and past cottages sheltering under mighty walnut trees, and ultimately, as it were, to the very monument of harmony and sodality. Gessner's Alpine landscapes resound with the heroic ideal of a rejuvenated nature.

OBSTRUCTED LANDSCAPE

The poetry and naturalism of Gessner's paintings are at their most intense in compositions whose evocation of enclosure creates the impression of an obstructed landscape. The horizon is positioned high in the tableau, and the painter's eye is trained on the proximate rather than the distant. Subjects and narratives are couched in a virtually impenetrable foreground arrogating the surface of the painting almost completely.

ADMIRERS AND DETRACTORS

His formal innovation made the idyll-painter of Zurich a pioneer of 19th-century poetic landscape and history painting, its material taken directly from human nature. For the first time ever, a publication to accompany the exhibition will address Gessner's reception with selected examples. Sources consulted include the statements of the artist's critics and disciples alike – painters and graphic artists such as Claude-Henri Watelet, Pierre Narcisse Guérin, Adam Friedrich Oeser, Carl Wilhelm Kolbe, Johann Heinrich Wilhelm Tischbein, Hans Jakob Oeri, Arnold Böcklin and John Constable, as well as poets who also wielded a

paintbrush, like Gottfried Keller and Adalbert Stifter. The latter's observation rings true to this day: The gentle law of nature that holds sway over Gessner's microcosm is the very same whose broken lines and interplay with the visible world continue to preoccupy us even now. The study of Gessner's accession to the status of 'painter-poet' and his reception as an artist, entitled 'Salomon Gessner. Idyllen in gesperrter Landschaft' (Hirmer-Verlag, Munich, 275 pp., over 100 colour ill.), comprises essays by Anke Fröhlich, Mechthild Haas, Anett Maren Lütteken, Wiebke Röben de Alencar Xavier, Valentine von Fellenberg and the conservator of the museum's Collection of Prints and Drawings, Bernhard von Waldkirch, all specialists in art, literature or cultural history. The book is available at the Kunsthaus Shop for CHF 68 and distributed in Switzerland by NZZ Libro.

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GENERAL INFORMATION / GUIDED TOURS / CONCERT

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

Sat, Sun, Tues 10 a.m.–6 p.m., Wed, Thurs, Fri 10 a.m.–8 p.m. Easter 1-5 April and Ascension 12-13 May 10 a.m.–6 p.m.

Admission: CHF 14 / concessions CHF 10.

Public Guided Tours: 6 March 10.30 a.m., 21 March 12.30 p.m., 1 May 10.30 a.m.

Private guided tours can be arranged by phoning +41 (0)44 253 84 84 (Mon–Fri 9 a.m.–12 noon).

Concert/reading of selections from the 'Idylls' of Salomon Gessner. Music by Ph.E. Bach, J. Haydn, W.A. Mozart et al.: 17 April, 4.45 p.m. With Claudia Dieterle (soprano), Uta Krause (reader), Michael Biehl (piano).

Advance Sales: SBB RailAway-Kombi, with 10% reduction on rail travel and entrance to the exhibition, at SBB stations and by phoning Rail Service: 0900 300 300 (CHF 1.19 per min.). Fnac (admission only): tel. +33 1 4157 3212, www.fnac.ch.

NOTE TO MEDIA

Download area for press photos: www.kunsthaus.ch/en/information/press.

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