

Press release
Zurich, 9 September 2010

Kunsthau Zürich presents 'Giant Herbs and Monster Trees – Drawings and Prints by Carl Wilhelm Kolbe'

The Kunsthau Zürich presents from 10 September to 28 November Switzerland's first museum exhibition of work by eccentric landscape artist Carl Wilhelm Kolbe (1759–1835). At the centre of the show are Kolbe's landscape engravings featuring enormous vegetation and gargantuan trees eerily stretching their boughs into the space about them, their evocative power gesturing at the Symbolists and Surrealists. The exhibition comprises some 60 pieces from the Anhaltische Gemäldegalerie Dessau together with works on loan from German and Swiss private collections.

A self-taught landscape artist and engraver who also did research in the field of linguistics, Kolbe is one of the most intriguing figures in German art at the turn of the 19th century. With his fantastical, virtually surreal landscapes, featuring woods and marshes in which flora towers above the heads of man and beast, he broke early on with the prevailing aesthetics to exert a considerable (albeit long underestimated) influence on the graphic arts of the Romantic period. Born in Berlin and trained in academic figural drawing, Kolbe was resident for much of his life in Dessau.

IN ZURICH THANKS TO SALOMON GESSNER

From 1805 to 1808 Kolbe lived in Zurich, where he produced engravings based on aquarelle gouaches by Salomon Gessner, who had died in 1788 and enjoyed posthumous celebrity as a painter and poet. Kolbe lived with the late artist's family, with whom, as he records in his autobiography, he spent three of the best years of his life. History, too, left its mark on his sojourn by the banks of the Limmat, for it was here that he learned of the collapse of the 'Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation'. His chalk drawing of the trunk of a fantastical dead willow tree, which Kolbe produced during that period and presented to the Zürcher Künstlergesellschaft when he left Zurich, speaks of the artist's profound uncertainty about the future of his generation, and expresses both admiration and criticism of the idylls portrayed by his predecessors.

HUMANKIND AND NATURE: AN IMPERILED SYMBIOSIS

Kolbe's renderings of trees are the product of his imagination: unlike the stringently composed, idealized *locus amoenus* of a Johann Christian Reinhart or a Joseph Anton Koch, Kolbe's work is entirely inspired by a meticulous observation of nature. His landscapes are akin to the limitless visions of a

Caspar David Friedrich; and although done in a different medium, Kolbe's engravings, with their creepily intimate regard, evoke the imperiled symbiosis of humankind and nature. These pioneers of the modern landscape are distinguished by their radical self-consciousness in the face of nature, which put paid to all of the conventions of their day.

ENTHRALLED BY WOODLANDS

Kolbe, an impassioned walker, typically spent his mornings at the easel, and his afternoons out of doors, where in turn he would think up ideas for compositions. His landscapes fall into two basic categories: the veneration of the idyllic, nurtured on the classicizing ideal of a fantasy Arcadia; and the wild and lonely forest, at the centre of which stands a solitary tree or copse. Kolbe worked with sketches made regularly from memory so as to capture the landscape's lively *genius loci* in his engravings, his declared goal in every depiction of nature.

SELF-TAUGHT MASTER ENGRAVER

Kolbe's sylvan landscapes are the culmination of a movement in print-making that had reached its zenith in the last third of the 18th century before the genre went rapidly out of fashion. An outsider and a maverick, Kolbe made an enormous contribution to his chosen medium, and the art world had to wait for Samuel Palmer (1805-1881) of England and Rodolphe Bresdin (1822-1885) of France, with their visionary landscapes, to produce prints on the same level. Like Kolbe, the two later artists were both self-taught master engravers.

Curator of the exhibition, which was conceived by the Anhaltische Gemäldegalerie Dessau and organized in collaboration with the Kunsthaus Zürich, is Bernhard von Waldkirch. An abundantly illustrated catalogue with texts by renowned specialists provides an introduction to his multifaceted oeuvre, and is available for CHF 59.- from the Kunsthaus shop.

GENERAL INFORMATION

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

Open: Sat, Sun, Tues 10 a.m.–6 p.m., Wed, Thurs, Fri 10 a.m.–8 p.m.

Admission CHF 14 / concessions CHF 10

Private guided tours in English can be arranged by phoning +41 (0)44 253 84 84.

Advance sales: RailAway/SBB Kombi-Ticket, with 10% reduction on rail travel to Zurich and entrance to the exhibition, at SBB stations and by phoning Rail

Service: 0900 300 300 (CHF 1.19 per min.).

NOTE TO MEDIA

Press visuals can be downloaded under www.kunsthaus.ch/en/information/press.

Contact: Kunsthaus Zürich, Kristin Steiner

kristin.steiner@kunsthaus.ch, tel. +41 (0)44 253 84 13