

Press release
Zurich, 14 March 2012

Kunsthhaus Zürich restores important painting by Ferdinand Hodler

Ferdinand Hodler (1853-1919), one of the most significant Swiss painters of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, created two versions of his important composition 'The Truth,' both of which are held in the Kunsthhaus Zürich. Now the first version is to be restored. Powerful yet subtle, this key work in Hodler's oeuvre is set to be rediscovered and, from 2013, will be displayed alongside the second version.

Measuring 196 x 273 cm, the monumental first version of the oil painting 'The Truth' was created in 1902. It comes from the Alfred Rüttschi Collection and was loaned to the Kunsthhaus Zürich in 1918. Later, in 1929, Rüttschi's heirs donated it to the Kunsthhaus. The work is the subject of a major restoration project which is now getting under way.

Hodler painted a second, more strongly stylized version of 'The Truth' in 1903 for the exhibition at the Vienna Secession in 1904. This work is owned by the City of Zurich and has been deposited with the Kunsthhaus on loan since 1930. The technical execution of this second work is different from the first; it is in a better state of preservation and is normally exhibited.

TRUTH VANQUISHES THE DARK FORCES

The two closely related compositions each have at their centre a nude woman, flanked to left and right by sinister 'dark men.' These symmetrically arranged figures turn away from her. For Hodler, the woman represents 'the truth' from which the forces of darkness are compelled to take flight. Within the context of Hodler's development, 'The Truth' can be seen as a Symbolist reworking of the early historical picture 'Calvin and the Professors' (1883/84; Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva). It was created against the backdrop of the Symbolist compositions of the 1890s and, in its definitive form, arose in 1898-99 out of ideas for the composition of 'The Day' (1904-1907), a further important work in the Kunsthhaus collection.

Present-day visitors are familiar with the second, completely finished version. Here, the allegorical figure of Truth stands serene and confident, directing the movements of the semi-naked, burly musclemen of darkness. They stride around the woman as if in a carefully rehearsed ballet, holding their arms expressively above their heads to ward off danger.

The first version, by contrast, appears more archaic and reduced. The male figures are largely covered by their dark, hooded cloaks, making them seem like eerie shadows. The terpsichorean, pathetic expressiveness of the gestures in

the second version is lacking. Truth appears as a transcendental being, her lucid gaze contrasting effectively with the dark, opaque mass of the cloaked figures. To the modern viewer, the greater simplicity and more matt technique of the first painting may exert an especially strong fascination, derived from the impression of elemental power that they create.

THE RESTORATION

Owing to the techniques used in painting it, the work presents a number of conservational problems: due to the low concentration of binding agents and the almost complete absence of a ground coat the paint layer is friable, tends to serious craquelure and dishing, and is flaking off. Additionally, the poor adhesion of the paint to the canvas has already resulted in a loss of paint layer, placing the work at acute risk. Over time, the retouching carried out during earlier restorations has changed colour and mars the overall aesthetic impression.

The conservation and restoration measures now beginning in the restoration workshop of the Kunsthhaus consist primarily in strengthening and stabilizing large areas of the extremely matt paintwork. Even cleaning the surface is a delicate undertaking. Tests are currently being carried out to determine the correct consolidating agent to use, so as to avoid either darkening the colours or creating glossy areas. The restoration work will be accompanied by the use of special technology to investigate the structure of the paint layer, the underdrawing and the materials used (nature of the support base, binding agents, pigments, etc.).

Stabilizing the finely cracked paint layer is a laborious and time-consuming process, as are the subsequent patching and retouching of the minute chips in the paint layer. There are also plans to remove or reduce older, ill-matched retouching and overpainting during this process.

SUPPORT FROM THE BANK OF AMERICA MERRILL LYNCH ART CONSERVATION PROJECT

The Kunsthhaus Zürich project is being completed through the unique Bank of America Merrill Lynch Art Conservation Project. Introduced in 2010 the project provides grants to nonprofit museums throughout the world to conserve historically or culturally significant works of art that are in need of restoration. This year it is supporting the restoration of 20 works of art and craftsmanship that are of outstanding historical value or cultural significance to the national heritage of 19 countries around the world. The 2012 award selections for Europe, the Middle East and Africa also include one of Leonardo Da Vinci's earliest manuscripts at the Castello Sforzesco in Milan; five Marc Chagall Paintings at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art and a Tintoretto painting reputed to be the largest painting ever done on canvas, at the Thyssen Museum in Madrid. The programme aims to contribute to the global arts community by restoring

important works that will strengthen public awareness of the arts throughout the world.

EXHIBITION IN 2013

Once the restoration is complete, the intention is to exhibit both versions of 'The Truth' side by side, with supporting documentation designed to derive full benefit from the increased understanding of Hodler's work and creative techniques. This will include draft sketches for both projects made by the artist which, for reasons of conservation, the Kunsthaus can only rarely display. The restoration, which will be completed during the course of this year, is being overseen by Hanspeter Marty, chief restorer of the Kunsthaus Zürich. Collection curator Philippe Büttner will present the painting from 15 January to 17 March 2013. Until then, the status of the restoration work will be documented on www.kunsthhaus.ch.

Supported by Merrill Lynch Wealth Management, a subsidiary of Bank of America.

NOTES TO MEDIA

Image data on the first version of 'The Truth' are available for download in the Press section of the Kunsthaus website.

Further information on the Merrill Lynch Art Conservation Project can be found at <http://museums.bankofamerica.com/arts/artconservation.aspx>

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