

Press release
Zurich, 17 January 2013

Kunsthhaus Zürich presents newly restored version of Hodler's 'The Truth'

Ferdinand Hodler (1853-1919), the outstanding Swiss painter of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, created two versions of his important composition 'The Truth.' The first of these has now been restored and will be on display in the collection, together with the second version and other works by Hodler, from 18 January to 14 April 2013.

Measuring 196 x 273 cm, the monumental first version of the oil painting 'The Truth' was created in 1902. It comes from the collection of Alfred Rüttschi and was donated to the Kunsthhaus Zürich by his heirs in 1929. At the centre of the composition stands a nude woman, flanked to left and right by sinister, symmetrically arranged 'dark men,' all of them turning away from her. For Hodler the woman represents the truth from which the forces of darkness are compelled to take flight.

THE RESTORATION: RESCUING A PAINTING AT RISK

Owing to the techniques used in painting it, the work presented a number of problems: due to the low concentration of binding agents and the almost complete absence of a ground coat the paint layer was friable, exhibited a tendency to serious cracks and dishing, and was flaking off. Over time, the retouching carried out during earlier restorations had changed colour and marred the overall aesthetic impression. The process of restoring the painting began in January 2012 with technological investigations in the Kunsthhaus workshop. Kunsthhaus staff worked with the Swiss Institute for Art Research (SIK-ISEA) to clarify issues concerning the structure of the paint layer and the materials used. The subsequent restoration work, which continues until December 2012, has involved fixing and stabilizing large areas of the extremely matt paintwork. Even cleaning the surface was a delicate undertaking. Tests were carried out to determine the correct consolidating agent to use, so as to avoid either darkening the colours or creating glossy areas. Fixing the finely cracked paint layer was a laborious and time-consuming process, as were the subsequent patching and retouching of the minute chips in it. Older, wrongly applied areas of retouching and overpainting were removed or reduced, and retouched using gouache paints.

THE EXHIBITION: TWO VERSIONS PLUS DRAFT SKETCHES

The temporary hanging of the first, newly restored version of 'The Truth' along with the second expands our understanding of Hodler's oeuvre and working

methods, as do the draft sketches for both projects made by the artist which, for reasons of conservation, the Kunsthaus can only rarely display.

Hodler painted the second, more strongly stylized version of 'The Truth' in 1903 and showed it in the exhibition at the Vienna Secession in 1904. This work is owned by the City of Zurich and has been deposited with the Kunsthaus on loan since 1930. More classical in execution than its predecessor, it is in a better state of preservation and has been regularly exhibited for decades.

A POLITICAL PROTEST?

The presentation reveals fascinating details of the story behind the works' creation. In 1904, Hodler himself suggested a link between the underlying concept and the 1899 retrial in France of the army officer Alfred Dreyfus, who had been unjustly sentenced to life imprisonment in a penal colony. The writer Emile Zola had rallied to Dreyfus's cause and called for the full truth to be revealed. Hodler, it is claimed, was inspired by this controversy and painted the work in support of Zola's demand. Researchers have however concluded that the idea for the picture may in fact have come about earlier, when Hodler was devising the major composition 'The Day.' Could it be that Hodler only renamed the work 'The Truth' at a later date, thereby transforming it into a protest picture?

The presentation of the two versions together enables us to study the significant differences of painterly character between them. The second, final version appears smoother and more stylized, the first rougher and more archaic. The Symbolist approach of the first version contrasts vividly with the immediacy of the brushwork of the great painter Hodler. For this reason, the earlier, freshly restored version may well be especially attractive to audiences schooled in the development of modern art.

PUBLICATION AND LECTURE

The restoration project was headed by the Kunsthaus's chief restorer Hanspeter Marty. Viola Möckel was charged with carrying out the restoration, while collection curator Philippe Büttner organized the small exhibition. The progress of the restoration is documented on www.kunsthhaus.ch. Public guided tours will take place at 11 a.m. on Sunday 27 January and Sunday 24 February.

The exhibition is accompanied by a publication (German/English, 48 pages, 29 mostly coloured illustrations) with contributions by Philippe Büttner, Viola Möckel and Bernhard von Waldkirch. It is available in the Kunsthaus shop for CHF 15.-.

At 6 p.m. on 27 February Paul Müller from SIK-ISEA and co-writer of the Catalogue raisonné of Hodler's paintings, will deliver a talk on 'The Truth' in the Hodler gallery.

SUPPORT FROM THE BANK OF AMERICA MERRILL LYNCH ART CONSERVATION PROJECT

The Bank of America Merrill Lynch Art Conservation Project is a unique initiative that provides grants to not-for-profit organisations throughout the world to conserve historically or culturally significant works of art that are in danger of degeneration, in order to preserve them for future generations. Introduced in 2010 across Europe, the Middle East and Africa, the programme was expanded this year to include the U.S., Asia Pacific and Latin America.

PRICES AND OPENING HOURS

Kunsthau Zürich, Heimplatz 1, CH-8001 Zurich

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

Admission: CHF 15 / CHF 10 (concessions), including the collection. Children and young people up to age 16 free of charge. Combined ticket including the collection and the exhibition 'Paul Gauguin' (until 27.01.13) CHF 25 / CHF 18 concessions and for groups of 20 or more.

Advance sales: SBB RailAway combination ticket, with discount on travel and admission: at stations and by phoning Rail Service 0900 300 300 (CHF 1.19/min. by land line), www.sbb.ch. Magasins Fnac: sales points in Switzerland: Rives, Balexert, Lausanne, Fribourg, Pathé Kino Basel, www.fnac.ch; France: Carrefour, Géant, Magasins U, 0 892 68 36 22 (EUR 0.34/min), www.fnac.com; Belgium: www.fnac.be.

NOTE TO MEDIA

Illustrations to accompany the press release are available for download from www.kunsthau.ch under Information > Press > Press Images.

Further information on The Bank of America Merrill Lynch Art Conservation Project: <http://museums.bankofamerica.com/arts/artconservation.aspx>

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