

Press release

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## **Kunsthhaus Zürich restores Pierre Bonnard's four-part 'Panneaux décoratifs - femmes au jardin'**

**Painted by Bonnard in 1890/91, the four-part work 'Women in the Garden' is the uncompleted first version of a screen; the second, which is more fully executed, is now in the Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Owing to conservational issues including paint loss and layer separation, the decision was taken to restore it to its former condition for the upcoming exhibition on the reception of Japanese art in France.**

Born near Paris in 1867, Pierre Bonnard was one of the leading figures in the group of artists known as the Nabis ('prophets'), which formed in 1889 and venerated the style of Paul Gauguin and the Japanese woodcut. Bonnard's bold depiction of four female figures of differing sizes constituted a new departure.

### THE UNCOMPLETED SCREEN

The panels were originally conceived as a four-part screen but were separated by Bonnard, as he felt that the individual sections worked better as free-standing paintings. The 'Panneaux décoratifs' have been held by the Kunsthhaus Zürich and on permanent display since 1984. Despite receiving regular attention the work was in fragile condition, partly due to Bonnard's painting technique and the materials he used, as well as the way they were combined. In an effort to achieve a matt appearance, Bonnard employed a low-sheen paint containing little binding agent, which he applied to unprepared paper that absorbed the binder. Unfortunately, this method soon led to adhesion problems. In areas of pastose or multi-layered paint especially, small flakes had come loose from the underlying layer, resulting in numerous small flaws and irregularities. The work underwent restoration from March to September 2014, to ensure that it remains accessible to visitors and can be loaned out to other museums.

### MICROSCOPED AND MAPPED

First, the state of conservation of the individual panels was analysed using a stereomicroscope and then mapped to reveal the extent of the damage and the work required. In general, the sections requiring consolidation exhibited two distinct damage phenomena: areas of intense colour application with protruding flakes of paint, where interventions at specific points would suffice; and others that required treatment in their entirety as the surface was powdering due to degradation of the binding agent. Prior to treatment, tests were carried out to establish which consolidating agents were suitable and how they could be

introduced between the ground coat and the layer of pigment. Very matt paints and those with insufficient binding agent have a tendency to darkening, glossiness or formation of tide marks on contact, which the restorers wanted to avoid. Once identified, the appropriate consolidating agent was then applied beneath the protruding flakes with a pointed brush and pressed down with a silicone spatula. The restorer observed each step in the process through a microscope.

### THE PURPOSE OF THE THICK PENCIL LINES

Images of the 'Woman in a Checked Dress' taken in raking light revealed that the paint is very coarse-grained in some areas. Under the microscope, it was possible to make out individual grains of pigment, indicating that instead of using the paints from a tube that were just coming into use at the time, Bonnard mixed his colours together from a combination of pigment and binding agent on his palette. The female figures were freely sketched out on paper using charcoal, enabling us to see the painter's own corrections as well as hints of light and shade. Bonnard then applied paint to these studies to differing degrees – covering almost the entire surface in the case of the 'Woman in a Checked Dress', only partially and using a small number of colour tones in the 'Seated Woman'. Vigorously applied pencil lines on the contours of the figures may have been made to transfer the outlines to the second version, which is now in the Musée d'Orsay.

### ON SHOW IN THE 'JAPONISME' EXHIBITION

Restoration of this major work from the Kunsthaus Zürich has been made possible thanks to the generous support of art insurer Nationale Suisse. Each stage is documented in the 'Collection' section of the website [www.kunsthhaus.ch](http://www.kunsthhaus.ch). The work will soon be on display once again, initially as part of the exhibition 'Monet, Gauguin, van Gogh... Japanese Inspirations' at the Kunsthaus Zürich from 20 February to 25 May 2015. The collaboration between Nationale Suisse and the Kunsthaus is set to continue, with the digitization of records of the Dada movement scheduled for 2015 and restoration of 'Velocità d'Automobile Luce Rumore' by the Futurist painter Giacomo Balla in 2016.

### CONTACT FOR THE MEDIA

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