

Press release
Zurich, 19 February 2015

Kunsthau Zürich presents 'Monet, Gauguin, van Gogh ... Japanese Inspirations'

From 20 February to 10 May 2015 the Kunsthau Zürich devotes a major exhibition to one of the most fascinating chapters in French art. Featuring around 350 exceptional paintings, woodblock prints and artefacts by European and Japanese masters, 'Monet, Gauguin, van Gogh ... Japanese Inspirations' explores Europe's view of Japan in the 19th century.

Japanese art is of fundamental importance to the development of Modernism. Almost all the great masters of French painting admired and drew inspiration from its pictorial motifs and characteristic style. They depicted art imported from Japan in their works, reinterpreted Japanese imagery, and internalized the visual idiom of the Japanese woodblock prints. This creative process remained influential long into the 20th century. The focus of the exhibition is on the period between 1860 and 1910, from the early phase to the heyday of 'Japonisme' in France. Paintings and prints by the leading artists of the period engage in dialogue with colour woodblock prints and precious artefacts by Japanese masters. Historical photographs, vessels, kimonos, fans and books from world-famous collections such as the Van Gogh Museum Amsterdam, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Musée d'Orsay, the State Pushkin Museum, Tate, the Foundation E. G. Bührle Collection and the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art build bridges between art and design, and from the ritual to the everyday.

DEPICTION, TRANSPOSITION, INTERNALIZATION

'Japonisme' was a veritable mania for Japanese art and culture in France that emerged after 1854, when the Far Eastern nation was compelled by the US to open up to the outside world. The exhibition examines three different ways in which artists engaged with Japan: the depiction of Japanese objects and motifs in the works of western artists; the transposition and interpretation of pictorial themes and forms inspired by Japan; and the internalization of Japanese art's characteristic styles and techniques.

WOMEN, MOUNTAINS, FLOWERS AND THE SEA

The vogue for all things Japanese is reflected in the way artists depicted imported Japanese art, objects and flowers in their paintings or, like van Gogh, transposed Japanese colour woodblock prints onto canvas. All the while, the manner of their representation remains indebted to the European tradition. For these artists, the unfamiliar subjects and compositional elements of the Japanese woodblock print represented an alternative to the established

aesthetic of European art. Their engagement with the sophisticated and highly developed pictorial universe of the Japanese woodblock print encouraged them to explore new visual forms in the depiction of their own environment, and to develop their own response to the richness and stringency of their Japanese inspirations. They took Japanese visual themes, including women at their toilet, waves or rocks amid the sea, and adapted them to their own requirements. Inspired by the serial depiction of a motif such as Mount Fuji, bridges or waterfalls in the work of Katsushika Hokusai and Utagawa Hiroshige, artists including Gustave Courbet, Claude Monet, Paul Cézanne and Henri Rivière likewise began to paint the same subject repeatedly; Courbet and Monet produced entire series of their own.

COMPOSITIONAL TECHNIQUES REINTERPRETED

The most important compositional techniques that were reinterpreted in the West include the flat juxtaposition of foreground and background, the steeply angled view from above or below, principal motifs cut off by the picture edge, diagonal pictorial elements, the simplification of forms using large and compact colour surfaces and strongly emphasized contours, the asymmetrical arrangement of visual elements, decorative structuring of the picture space, and extreme vertical or horizontal formats. Many artists – van Gogh among them – admired the vibrant and extremely nuanced colours of the woodblock prints and adopted them into their own work. It is noteworthy that the visual aesthetic of the Japanese colour woodblock print was initially applied to painting and only transferred to prints by a later generation of artists. Through their recourse to Japanese paradigms, artists such as Toulouse-Lautrec, Rivière, Cassatt and Vallotton helped to elevate the status of their printing techniques. In 1893, Monet designed his garden at Giverny to include a water lily pond and bridge modelled on Japanese colour woodblock prints. The vegetation, too, was inspired by the Far East: this was a place where irises, wisteria, azaleas and chrysanthemums grew, and where Monet painted the water lily pictures which are today regarded as masterpieces of the early 20th century and informed the work of subsequent generations of artists. They would have been inconceivable were it not for the engagement with Japanese art. The visual themes and stylistic techniques concerned can be found in earlier European art; but it was the omnipresence of woodblock prints and albums in France that led to the Japanese being credited with opening the eyes of their western counterparts.

VALUABLE OBJECTS COLLECTED BY ARTISTS THEMSELVES

Almost all the artists who drew inspiration from the pictorial world and formal idiom of the Far East were also collectors of art from Japan, in particular 'ukiyo-e' colour woodblock prints. At the time these could be purchased cheaply; now they are regarded as masterpieces of their age and change hands for high prices. Indeed, some of the Japanese colour woodblock prints on display in the

exhibition come from artists' collections of the 19th century. Like the visual arts, the applied arts also took ideas from imported ceramics, lacquerware, fans and screens. These provided motifs and forms not only for Émile Gallé, François-Eugène Rousseau, Jean Carriès and Paul Jeanneney but also for Edgar Degas, Pierre Bonnard, Maurice Denis, Félix Vallotton and Auguste Rodin. Japan also played a central role in the work of artists such as Jean Carriès and Paul Jeanneney, who worked with materials such as stoneware that had previously been neglected by the applied arts.

FIRST EXHIBITION FOR 45 YEARS

A theme that has only recently gained the attention of European art historians is 'erotic Japonisme', represented in this exhibition by the juxtaposition of highly erotic 'shunga' (literally 'pictures of spring') and prints by Pablo Picasso. The majority of the Japanese objects on display come from the Museum Folkwang in Essen – a collection that is almost wholly unknown. A look back at the exhibition history of the Kunsthaus Zürich reveals an early interest in Japanese art. As long ago as 1928 Wilhelm Wartmann, the first director of the Kunsthaus, showed Japanese woodblock prints from the collection of Willy Boller from Baden. In the decade that followed, the Kunsthaus also exhibited further precious works from the collections of Alfred Baur and, once again, Boller. The most recent exhibition of treasures from Japan at the Kunsthaus Zürich was organized in 1969 by the then director René Wehrli. It comprised sculptures, ceramics, robes and masks from Noh theatre as well as hung scrolls, screens and lacquerware objects from public and private Japanese collections. Forty-five years have passed since works from the Far East were last shown at the Kunsthaus. Now, while masterpieces from the Kunsthaus collection are on display in Tokyo and Kobe, audiences interested in Japanese art, design and society will have an opportunity to encounter works by celebrated artists from this cultural milieu that have never before been seen in Zurich.

GUIDED TOURS, AUDIOGUIDE ALSO FOR CHILDREN AND CONCERT

Public guided tours in German: Wednesdays and Thursdays 6 p.m., Fridays 3 p.m. and Sundays 11 a.m. Guided tours in English: Saturdays 21 March und 9 May at 1 p.m. Guided tour in Japanese: Saturday 28 February, 1 p.m. Private guided tours by arrangement. Children have their own audioguide (only in German) together with a colouring page and crayons. Concert by the Zurich Chamber Orchestra featuring works by Debussy, Ravel and others on 26 April at 11 a.m. Tickets: www.zko.ch.

LAVISHLY ILLUSTRATED CATALOGUE

The exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue in German and English. Published by Steidl Verlag with 376 pages and numerous illustrations, it includes essays by Geneviève Aitken, Christoph Dorsz, Sandra Gianfreda, Claire Guitton, Gregory

Irvine, Peter Kropmanns, Michiko Mae, Ursula Perucchi-Petri and Belinda Thomson as well as other texts. It is available from the Kunsthaus shop, price CHF 45.

The exhibition is a collaboration with the Museum Folkwang in Essen and was conceived by Sandra Gianfreda.

Supported by the Truus and Gerrit van Riemsdijk Foundation and other patrons.

ADMISSION INCLUDES AN AUDIO TOUR IN FOUR LANGUAGES

Kunsthaus Zürich, Heimplatz 1, CH-8001 Zurich, tel. +41 (0)44 253 84 84, www.kunsthhaus.ch. Fri – Sun/Tues 10 a.m. – 6 p.m., Wed/Thurs 10 a.m. – 8 p.m. Public holidays: Easter 3 – 6 April, 1 May: 10 a.m. – 6 p.m. Admission to the exhibition including audioguide (in English, German, French or Italian): CHF 22 / CHF 17 (concessions and groups). Combined ticket including the collection: CHF 27 / CHF 20 (concessions and groups). Children and young people up to the age of 16 free of charge.

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/en/kunsthhaus-zuerich.

Zurich Tourism: hotel room reservations and ticket sales, Tourist Service at Zurich Main Railway Station, tel. +41 44 215 40 00, information@zuerich.com, www.zuerich.com.

Magasins Fnac: sales points in Switzerland: Rive, 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 AND CONTACT FOR THE MEDIA

Visual material is available for download at www.kunsthhaus.ch under Information > Press.

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