

Press release

Zurich, 24 November 2016

Kunsthhaus Zürich acquires new work by Edvard Munch. Special presentation of the Esche collection.

From 25 November to 26 February the Kunsthhaus Zürich is staging a special presentation on 'Edvard Munch and the Esche Family. The Portraits – The Collection'. Leading works by Edvard Munch and other artists owned by the Esche family of industrialists in Chemnitz are reunited at the Kunsthhaus Zürich. New addition is the 'Portrait of Hanni Esche' (1905).

In 1905 Edvard Munch painted six portraits of the family of Chemnitz textile industrialist Herbert Esche, most of which, centred around the large group portrait of the children, have since 1997 been part of the Herbert Eugen Esche Foundation, housed at the Kunsthhaus Zürich, and have hung as part of the collection there. Now the Foundation has been gifted the portrait of mother Hanni Esche as well, the counterpart to the children's portrait and a milestone in the development of Munch's strongly coloured mature style. This 'Portrait of Hanni Esche' (1905), which now enhances the collection of the Kunsthhaus Zürich on permanent loan, is positively radiant. Against a glowing yellow background the lady's pure, pale blue robe appears like a great wave, above which her eyes gaze brightly out of her pink face at her children and at the viewer. The portrait's arrival at the Kunsthhaus and its reunion with the rest of the Esche family likenesses (the portrait of the mother returns to that of her two children) is to be celebrated with a little exhibition reconstructing the creation of the work.

RECONSTRUCTION OF THE ESCHE COLLECTION

The paintings hung originally in the imposing villa built for Herbert Esche by Henry van de Velde, but when Herbert Esche moved in with his daughter in Küsnacht in 1945, they were moved to the dining room there, also appointed by van de Velde. This is the situation the exhibition reconstructs, accompanied by documentation of the ground-breaking building and an account of how Munch's group came to be, and supplemented by some ten additional paintings from the family collection – among them works by Theo von Rysselberghe, Signac, Cross, Vuillard and others. Together they constitute an ensemble emblematic of the avant-garde taste of the turn of the 20th century, such as is rarely seen.

'IN CHEMNITZ TOMORROW --- MUNCH.'

Hanni and Herbert Esche were already successful textile entrepreneurs in 1902 when they commissioned Henry van de Velde, the founder of Jugendstil, to build them a villa. It was van der Velde's first significant commission and laid the foundation for his activity and reputation as an architect. Every detail was meticulously designed – not only the appointments but even the villa's artistic ornaments. But the Esches, who were well acquainted with colour and form and had a predilection for pointillist painters, chose Edvard Munch for their family portraits. Hanni Esche wrote to him and invited him to the villa, and he was not long in accepting: 'I like to paint children, since I really love them.' On 30 September 1905 the artist telegraphed, 'In Chemnitz tomorrow --- Munch.' Living room, bedroom and bathroom were prepared at the villa; a bottle of cognac was positioned on a little side table with instructions that it be replaced daily. Since the end of his turbulent relationship with Tulla Larsen, which had concluded dramatically on 12 September 1902 with the firing of a pistol, Munch's condition was very labile, and was to culminate in a catastrophic nervous breakdown in 1908. After dining with the family, the taciturn guest would go into town, mostly to the Café Stadt Gotha. It went on like that for about three weeks, and just as Esche was beginning to become uncomfortable, van de Velde stopped by and Munch finally asked for paints, brushes and canvas, and in four days painted seven or eight pictures: two of Esche; the large children's portrait; the little close-up of Erdmute; a view of Chemnitz from the villa; Mrs Esche and another portrait of the children with their governess, which however he found not to his liking and cut into two; one of Erdmute with her doll and the other of Hans-Herbert with the governess. On Sunday, 29 October, Munch, Mr and Mrs Esche and Ernest Thiel, a Swedish collector, were invited to luncheon at the van de Velde's in Weimar, and it was there that Munch began his Nietzsche portrait for Thiel.

MOTHER AND CHILDREN IN DIALOGUE

When the Kunsthaus removed the 'Portrait of Hanni Esche' from its packing crate and placed it, in the presence of her granddaughter, next to the 'Portrait of Children. Erdmute and Hans-Herbert Esche' (1905), it came as a surprise that for all their differences the two paintings complement each other – the burgeoning dialogue between mother and children is palpable. It is an ensemble composed as such, virtually a group portrait in two parts. The small format of the half-figure portrait is coerced into energetic balance with the more extensive, full-length double portrait by its greater chromatic and painterly density: the significantly livelier mama presents her two rather pale, rather shyly posing children. It is cause for celebration that the paintings have now been

reunited after such a long separation, and restores to both masterpieces their original aura.

MUNCH AND ZÜRICH

The special presentation was organised by Christian Klemm, former Collection curator at the Kunsthaus and member of the board of the Herbert Eugen Esche Foundation. Edvard Munch himself had viewed the venue chosen for the event, the historic wing of the Kunsthaus appointed in late Jugendstil, on the occasion in 1922 of an exhibition devoted to his work. The Kunsthaus Zürich holds the largest collection of pieces by Edvard Munch outside of Norway. Almost all of the paintings are on permanent display in the second upper level of the museum built in 1910 by Karl Moser. In 1952, 1987 and 2013 there were additional major exhibitions of the work of the best-known Nordic Expressionist.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Kunsthaus Zürich, Heimplatz 1, CH-8001 Zurich

Tel. +41 (0)44 253 84 84, www.kunsthaus.ch.

Fri-Sun/Tues 10 a.m. – 6 p.m., Wed, Thurs 10 a.m. – 8 p.m. For public holiday opening see www.kunsthaus.ch.

Admission incl. collection: CHF 15 / CHF 10 concessions and groups (valid until 31.12.16, whereupon CHF 16/11). Admission free to visitors up to the age of 16.

Public guided tours of the exhibition (in German language):

Thursday, 1 December, 6.30 p.m., Sunday, 22 January, 11 a.m.

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/kunsthaus-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.

NOTE TO EDITORS

This press release and select illustrations are available for download at www.kunsthaus.ch > Information > Press.

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