

Press release
Zurich, 8 March 2018

Kunsthaus Zürich presents 'Magritte, Dietrich, Rousseau. Visionary Objectivity'

From 9 March to 8 July 2018 the Kunsthaus Zürich showcases 56 works of representational painting spanning the years 1890 to 1965. Common to all of them is an objectivity that is also visionary: emerging on the cusp of modernity, it runs through Böcklin and Vallotton, the 'naïve artists' and painters of New Objectivity, to the Surrealism of Dalí and Magritte.

This new exhibition at the Kunsthaus revisits a form that, like abstraction, was crucial to Classical Modernism: representational art.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF MODERN PAINTING

By the mid-19th century, as modern painting begins to take shape, the focus of attention is already shifting from content towards artistic means. Édouard Manet attaches great importance to 'peinture' – the painterly – while Paul Cézanne's 'taches', or patches of colour, aim not to depict the real world but instead to confer reality upon the image itself. This central idea is carried through into the Cubism that Cézanne anticipates. Collection curator Philippe Büttner has assembled works by some twenty artists who adopted an entirely different approach: at once objective and visionary. For these painters the communicative force of 'peinture' is not what matters; rather, they set out to create visual spaces that remain illusionistic. Even so, Arnold Böcklin – the earliest artist represented in the exhibition – is concerned not with realism but with the primacy of imagination. The landscape and scenery of his 1880 work 'The Awakening of Spring' are, on the face of it, easy to understand and yet dreamlike and visionary, evoking with painterly precision the alternative reality of the mythical.

PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTANCES

In his first major work 'La malade', painted in Paris in 1892, Félix Vallotton bypasses Impressionism and draws instead on the narrative Dutch interior painting of the 17th century to create a work of meticulously rendered, precise detail. Yet in the psychological distances perceptible between his figures, he proposes a suggestively new take on this seemingly traditional painting technique. Later, as a landscape painter, he will turn his cool gaze towards the phantasmagoric hyper-presence of natural phenomena. Vallotton was also partly responsible for discovering the 'naïve' Henri Rousseau, praising his jungle painting enthusiastically in an 1891 article. Rousseau paints every leaf with

precise contours, accumulating individual, neatly catalogued elements and collaging them into a world of hypnotic strangeness. What impresses here is not 'peinture' but the increasingly autonomous formal rhythms and scenic patterns marking the transition from the familiar to the unknown. For all its superficial descriptiveness, painting thus becomes a novel alternative to the realistic depiction of the world.

NAÏVE ART IN THE MODERNIST CANON

The history of naïve art – represented in the exhibition by key works from Henri Rousseau, Camille Bombois, Henri Bauchant and others – was retold at length in Kunsthau exhibitions of 1937 and 1975. Their induction into the modernist canon came about largely thanks to the German collector and dealer Wilhelm Uhde (1874–1947), who owned one of the Rousseaus in the Kunsthau collection. New Objectivity also features in the exhibition, exemplifying the return to representation and rejection of the avant-garde after the brutal caesura of the First World War. And yet – as Niklaus Stoecklin and Adolf Dietrich demonstrate – supposed objectivity often nurtures an estrangement fed by the almost hypnotic concentration of seeing. This is particularly striking in Dietrich, who magically confers an enhanced presence on his simple, rural motifs.

THE CONSCIOUS AND UNCONSCIOUS WORLDS: SURREALISM

The Dadaists and Surrealists offered a very distinct response to the First World War. In their eyes, society and politics had been thoroughly compromised by the conflict; and the Surrealists therefore sought to express worlds of the unconscious. Eschewing convention and repression, they set out to find the uncategorized essence of humanity as it manifested itself in dreams and unfettered creativity. Some Surrealists, such as Joan Miró, relied heavily on the development of the painterly; others created dreamlike images founded on a carefully constructed legibility: with the precision of an Old Master, Salvador Dalí shone a light into hitherto unmapped recesses of the unconscious, while René Magritte deployed what was, ostensibly, an entirely representational technique but, through a bravura exercise in the avoidance of meaning, took the peaceful coexistence of form and content to absurd lengths in order to re-energize it.

RARELY SEEN, REMARKABLY ALLURING

From Böcklin to Dalí, from Vallotton to Dietrich, from the precise passion of a Rousseau creating worlds not seen before to Magritte's marmoreal birds: all share a visionary objectivity revealed in a selection of works covering a broad spectrum of both motifs and forms. The exhibition includes 56 paintings of human beings, animals, landscapes and plants from the Kunsthau collection. Over half of them, especially works by Camille Bombois, André Bauchant, Adolf Dietrich and Niklaus Stoecklin, have not been exhibited for many years. All exert a remarkable allure, be it through wonderful self-portraits, hyper-realistic

depictions of nature, or dazzlingly colourful backgrounds that envelop the figures in surreal fashion. They allow us to explore the enormous potential of a modernism that is – or purports to be – representational: a movement that rehabilitates and fundamentally reinvents the essence of things after its temporary banishment by the avant-garde.

PUBLICATION AND EVENT

An accompanying publication (96 pages, 54 colour illustrations, in German language) with a text by Philippe Büttner contextualizes the reception of representational art within the history of the Kunsthaus collection. It is available from the Kunsthaus shop, price CHF 22.

At 6 p.m. on 26 April, art historian Yves Guignard will be giving a lecture (in German language) on 'Wilhelm Uhde – discoverer of naïve art'. Attendance is included in the price of admission to the exhibition.

Supported by Albers & Co AG

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: CHF 16 / CHF 11 (concessions and groups). Combined ticket for the exhibitions and collection: CHF 26 / CHF 19 (concessions and groups). Admission free to visitors up to the age of 16.

Public guided tours in German: Sun 11.3./8.7. at 2 p.m. and 8.4. at 11 a.m.; Wed 18.4. at 6 p.m., Thurs 22.3./24.5./14.6. at 6 p.m.; Fri 8.6./22.6. at 3 p.m.; Sat 5.5. at 1 p.m.; Private guided tours by arrangement.

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.

INFORMATION FOR THE MEDIA

Visual materials are available at www.kunsthaus.ch > Information > Press.

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