

**KUNSTHAUS
ZÜRICH**

**ALBERT
VON
KELLER**

SALONS SÉANCES SECESSION



EXHIBITION

Munich in the 19th century was the undisputed German capital of art, outshone internationally only by Paris. Albert von Keller (1844–1920) was a well-respected and productive Munich painter with roots in Zurich and a wealth of contacts in the French art world. In 1870 he began to exhibit copiously, and from 1883 on was a frequent participant in the Paris salon. In 1886 he joined Munich's newly founded Psychological Society and in 1892 co-founded the Munich Secession. The very picture of the contemporary artist, von Keller interpreted classical visual subjects in what was considered the modern style and thus updated them, bringing his understanding of the modern sensibility to bear on a transposition of social mores into the present day. Von Keller demonstrated a variety of painting techniques, like a virtuoso pianist in his mastery and combination of a wide range of styles and performance methods. Indeed, in his studio as well as at home, in an ostentatiously central location, the aristocrat of painting would play on a Bechstein grand, and considered his art an outgrowth of the spirit of music, as created by such composers as Chopin and Wagner. Of special interest to von Keller was the occult: he was fascinated by phenomena in the no-man's-land between life and death, between objective perception and suggestive deception. Characteristic of the painter was also his fondness for all manner of palimpsest. Von Keller's expressive range was astonishingly broad, running the gamut from pleasing harmony all the way to alienating dissonance, and his art thus offers a detailed account of Wilhelmian and Belle Époque society. He was guided in his painting by the precept of liberty, and women furnished him with his chief motif. *Jugend* magazine praised von Keller for training a 'new and wonderful' light on the female sex. His sensitive way with a paintbrush and the brilliance of his colours created works whose atmospheric Impressionism is mysteriously suggestive: the marriage of *Psyche* and *peinture*.

The Kunsthaus Zürich is hosting the first comprehensive museum show dedicated to Albert von Keller in a century. Curated by Gian Casper Bott, the exhibition finally allows a modern public to re-discover a painter renowned in his own lifetime (in 1914 critics spoke of a veritable 'Keller-mania') and to evaluate his work without preconceptions. Keller's pictures, which were considered modern by his contemporaries, offer today's viewers a glimpse at the world in which classical modernism was revolutionized. The exhibition is based on the collection of Dr. Oskar A. Müller, which came to the Kunsthaus in 2006, supplemented with objects on loan from private collections and other museums. Chief among the latter is Munich's Neue Pinakothek, whose works on show in Zurich include Keller's 'Resurrection' painting (1886), his legendary large-format masterpiece. Chosen for their exemplary character, fully 130 pieces created over the course of some fifty years offer a comprehensive survey of Albert von Keller's work.

Nude on the Beach
1874, Oil on wood, 22.5 x 49.5 cm,
Kunsthaus Zürich, Gift from
the estate of Dr. Oskar A. Müller

KUNSTHAUS ZÜRICH

Albert von Keller
Salons, Séances, Secession

SALONS

Von Keller's early paintings meld the female form with the phenomenon of the salon to produce an image of bourgeois femininity. Created around 1871, 'Sad News' features an elegant *grande dame* of the contemporary metropolis against the setting of her salon. Like an odalisque in one of the era's many Orientalist images, evoking a wealth of sensual pleasures, she lies across a sofa, a bundle of correspondence on the lavish floral carpet next to her testimony to happier days, filled perhaps with a lover's vows of eternal fidelity. A sigh is almost audible in the room: 'Such is life.'

Sad News

Around 1871, Oil on canvas,
62.5 x 53.5 cm,
Kunsthau Zürich, Gift from
the estate of Dr. Oskar A. Müller



From 1882 to 1883, Albert von Keller and his wife Irene lived part-time in Paris, not far from the legendary Palais Garnier, the Paris opera house opened in 1875. – While it was characteristic of von Keller to include portraits in his genre paintings, it was precisely those pieces that took on a peculiarly still-life aesthetics. In numerous groups of works, von Keller expresses his devotion to variety. The two portraits of Milli Beckmann, for instance, painted in Paris in 1883, are slightly Orientalized variations on the theme of 'lady on sofa'. Each painting conveys its own chromatic, formal and decorative idea: 'Milli Beckmann with Daughter' reflects, chiefly in its palette of colours, the situation that is transposed in 'Parisienne on an Ottoman' into another format, and thus transformed from realist representation to graven image. The surface of the picture becomes an ornamental pattern, as it were, further emphasized by von Keller's selective use of *peinture pure* under the influence of the Impressionists. A German acquaintance of the painter's makes of the protagonist a figure from a fictitious French novel; the bluish-green wall becomes a *fond rouge*; and the umbrella, pressed into service by von Keller's virtuoso hand, becomes a pink *parapluie*.

Milli Beckmann

Paris (Parisienne on Ottoman),
1883, Oil on wood, 32.5 x 27.5 cm,
Kunsthau Zürich, Gift from
the estate of Dr. Oskar A. Müller

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Milli Beckmann with Daughter

Paris, 1883, Oil on wood,
23.5 x 37.5 cm,
Kunsthau Zürich, Gift from
the estate of Dr. Oskar A. Müller



KUNSTHAUS ZÜRICH

Albert von Keller
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A theme of von Keller's 1891 'Picture Book' is vision in all of its variety, from a mother's loving regard to the reader's gaze at pictures in a book. It offers a glimpse at a scene of contentment and private well-being, raised to the status of a common fantasy or example by its display at public exhibitions. Its cozy contentment threatens to become its opposite. In his 'Diner' (1891), Albert von Keller renders contemporary social mores palpably present.

The Picture Book

1891, Oil on lime-wood,
69.5 x 87 cm,
Kunstmuseum Basel
Photo: Kunstmuseum Basel,
Martin P. Bühler



Diner

1891, Oil on wood, 42.5 x 82 cm,
Kunsthhaus Zürich, Gift from
the estate of Dr. Oskar A. Müller



Von Keller's 'Portrait of Alexandra Feodorovna', his 1896 likeness of the last Czarina, may be considered a bravura marriage of tradition and modernization, a public attempt to create a representative masterpiece. It is surely the Czarina's most beautiful portrait, a work seemingly made to be used in a PR campaign for both its subject and its painter, who thereby undoubtedly won himself an entrée to Munich's elegant female society.

Czarina Alexandra Feodorovna

around 1896, Oil on canvas,
121.5 x 86.5 cm,
Kunsthhaus Zürich, Gift from
the estate of Dr. Oskar A. Müller



KUNSTHAUS ZÜRICH

Albert von Keller
Salons, Séances, Secession

SÉANCES

The New Testament tells of how Christ brought the daughter of Jairus back from the dead, and in his 'Resurrection of the Daughter of Jairus' (1886) von Keller made of the Biblical locus the central 'modern' historical subject of his oeuvre. As if he had set out to colonize new periods for use by painters, von Keller here explores various deep-seated levels of consciousness. Christ appears in the guise of a hypnotist, as it were, reviving his medium from a trance state. Von Keller's daughter of Jairus was based on a series of studies, of models both living and deceased. The artist painted 'miracles' in a demystifying age that had already begun to lose its awe, a process that continues to this day. Here too, as in his observations of society, von Keller is intrigued by the exclusive and the exceptional. He analyses miraculous occurrences in the no-man's-land between traditional religious thinking and the secular thirst for knowledge. The charm of his 'Resurrection' painting derives from its nuanced account of human behaviour, from the enthralling range of von Keller's attention to both the appearance and the emotions of the witnesses to this miraculous event.

The Resurrection of the Daughter of Jairus

1886, Oil on canvas, 213 x 353.5 cm,
Bavarian State Picture Galleries
Munich, Neue Pinakothek
Photo: Blauel/Gnamm - Artothek



Albert von Keller styled himself a sort of artist-medium and fostered the rumour that he had painted certain of his works while unconscious, under the influence of suggestion. By his own account, he considered himself 'in many ways a passive instrument for the perfection of the creative process. Von Keller claimed to see in the creation of a work of art 'a miracle every bit as marvellous as the creation of a human being; and in the feeling of bliss attendant upon artistic production, upon the completion of an act of creation and the ability to make something out of nothing, the chief motivation for artistic work'. The 'painter-psychologist and meta-psychic', as his friend, the physician and parapsychologist Albert von Schrenck-Notzing, called him, represented the last generation preceding Sigmund Freud and psychoanalysis.

'Lily disgeistes', the anonymous medium von Keller painted in 1895, is to this day the most enigmatic figure in the painter's corpus. Her countenance, pale, nervous, sensitive and slightly fraught, unites the quintessential features of his subjects. His sympathy for his model's sleepwalking essence is overt; she was surely one of the figures in his repertoire in whom he saw his own soul reflected.

The Anonymous Medium 'Lily disgeistes'

1895, Oil on wood, 35 x 28 cm,
Kunsthau Zürich, Gift from
the estate of Dr. Oskar A. Müller



KUNSTHAUS ZÜRICH

Albert von Keller
Salons, Séances, Secession

At the dawn of the 20th century, the somnambulist dancer Madeleine Guipet caused a furore, and von Keller's paintings of her anticipated various Expressionist tendencies. He was plainly at pains to inform his pictures with the fascination aroused by the nexus of dreams and expressive dance, and to evoke in his viewers a reprise of their enthusiasm for the actual phenomenon.

The Somnambulist Dancer Madeleine

around 1904, Oil on oak, 41 x 24 cm,
Bavarian State Picture Galleries
Munich, Neue Pinakothek
Photo: Artothek



SECESSION AND FIN DE SIÈCLE

Both a symbolist painting of the highest order and one of von Keller's masterpieces, 'In the Moonlight' (1894) treats the chiaroscuro essence of desire. Its female subject, not so much demonized as lent an erotic aura, is elevated to the status of an aesthetic being whom the viewer is invited to adore. The play of its signifiers, the interpreter might suggest, interpellates its recipients on a variety of levels; it is a complex combination of semiotic systems, and contemporary aesthetic theory would likely speak of its 'discursive machinery'. Ultimately, however, its subject proper is painting itself, as well as the disclosure of its medium.

In the Moonlight

1894, Oil on canvas, 150 x 100.5 cm,
Kunsthau Zürich, Gift from
the estate of Dr. Oskar A. Müller



KUNSTHAUS ZÜRICH

Albert von Keller
Salons, Séances, Secession

Like his colleagues in the fin de siècle, von Keller was prompted by an apprehension of the decadence of his era to seek out his cultural benchmarks in the past, chiefly in classical antiquity. Cassandra, the prophetess of doom, offered his generation a figure whose mood reflected their own diffuse presentiment of imminent catastrophe. Von Keller's Faustian 'Descent into Hell' (1912) conjures up the morbid erotic thrill in the air on the eve of the First World War, the flowering of an epoch deeded to death. Fire becomes a metaphor for a lascivious fascination with fatality, consumptive passion and incandescent love. The protagonist of this picturesque study of disintegration is the very image of a femme fatale. One of von Keller's most enchanting figures, seemingly swept up in a maelstrom of anthemic joy, is his 1909 'Camilla Eibenschütz as Myrrhine in *Lysistrata*'. The viewer is cast in the role of a man consumed by love, in an atmosphere of pure joie de vivre.

In a Dream / Cassandra
(Gisela von Wehner) 1911,
Oil on canvas, 85.5 x 71 cm,
Kunsthau Zürich, Gift from
the estate of Dr. Oskar A. Müller



Descent into Hell
1912, Oil on canvas, 66.5 x 44.5 cm,
Kunsthau Zürich, Gift from
the estate of Dr. Oskar A. Müller

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**Camilla Eibenschütz as
Myrrhine in «Lysistrata»**
1909, Oil on canvas, 72.5 x 49 cm,
Private collection

