

Media release
Zurich, 2 November 2023

New exhibition of the controversial Emil Bührle Collection at the Kunsthaus Zürich

From 3 November 2023, the Kunsthaus Zürich will be showing the Bührle Collection under the title: 'A Future for the Past. The Bührle Collection: Art, Context, War and Conflict'. At the heart of the exhibition are a range of differing and sometimes conflicting perspectives on the historical context in which Emil Bührle – arms manufacturer and patron of the arts – assembled his collection, and the key question of how a nuanced approach to history can be implemented successfully in the immediate present. Video statements illustrating a range of positions regarding the Bührle Collection, along with the biographies of former owners of some of the works, play a central role in this new presentation, which extends over a number of phases.

The Bührle Collection has been exhibited on long-term loan at the Kunsthaus Zürich since autumn 2021. It contains works of great art-historical value, but at the same time it has attracted controversy owing to the way in which it was accumulated: a substantial part of Bührle's wealth was derived from arms sales during the Nazi period. Some works in the collection were seized from their Jewish owners by the Nazis and, because they qualified as Nazi-looted art, had to be returned by way of restitution after the Second World War. In some cases, Jewish owners sold works between 1933 and 1945 outside the area of Nazi rule in the US, Switzerland and the unoccupied area of France, for example, in order to finance their escape and to support themselves. Those works now form the subject of debate.

THE KUNSTHAUS ASKS QUESTIONS AND TAKES A POSITION

Ann Demeester, Director of the Kunsthaus Zurich, explains: 'We want to shed light on the complex and conflicted context of the Bührle Collection. It is a collection of high-quality art, but it is controversial. The paintings themselves are in no way implicated in the unimaginable crimes of the National Socialist era, but they do bear witness to them, and prompt us to remember the victims of Nazi terror, recall their fates, and reflect on Switzerland's role in the Second World War.'

The Kunsthaus profited from donations by Emil Bührle and the foundation that was set up after his death, and is now specifically re-examining its role as a

museum within society. Ann Demeester emphasizes: 'We believe it is important to develop a new approach to the Bührle Collection together. By asking critical questions, we want to connect the presentation of unique masterpieces and their history with the present day.'

The new exhibition links art, history and context together throughout. This has been made possible by a new agreement signed in 2022, under which the Foundation E. G. Bührle Collection, as owner, handed over curatorial management of the private, long-term loan to the Kunsthaus. The designated director then decided to rethink the presentation, along with the team and in dialogue with critical external voices.

ADVISORY PANEL AND INTERDISCIPLINARY TEAM: CONSENSUS AND DIFFERENCES

The exhibition was designed by an interdisciplinary team drawn from various departments at the Kunsthaus. From November 2022 to October 2023, they were assisted by an external advisory panel of experts. Following disagreements over the weight which the new presentation should accord to the individual fates of previous owners who fell victim to the Nazi regime, the advisory panel resigned in mid-October. The Kunsthaus regrets this decision: 'With their passionate commitment, incisive scrutiny and constructive criticism, the seven members of the advisory panel helped to shape the concept and key aspects of the exhibition,' says Ann Demeester. 'The twelve months we spent working together were characterized by great mutual respect. Ultimately, however, we agreed that we did not share the same view on all aspects of practical implementation.' Differences of opinion are part of the exhibition, which deliberately sets out to give multiple voices a say. The Kunsthaus expects that the presentation will continue to spark valuable discussions, just as it did between the core team and the advisory panel during the preparatory phase.

MULTIPLE VOICES AND DIALOGUE DEFINE THE PROCESS

What do those affected tell us? What do our visitors feel? The exhibition begins in the past and ends with questions about the future. More than 20 contributors offer their opinions in video and audio statements; they include Vera Rottenberg (former Federal Supreme Court judge), Jacques Picard (historian, former member of the Bergier Commission), Gina Fischli (visual artist), Felicitas Heimann-Jelinek (scholar of Jewish studies) and Hanspeter Frey (former Bührle company employee). Visitors can expect a chorus of voices, experiences and opinions. And what of the public response? The digital visitor survey and the opinions collected in the future room offer an important insight into the public mood. Every Wednesday will see a session entitled 'The Kunsthaus is listening', in which a member of the core team will be available for face-to-face discussion from 4.15 p.m. to 6 p.m. Ann Demeester says: 'The various opportunities for participation are an experience for both visitors and us as a museum. We are

learning where we have come from and where the journey we are undertaking with our audience might take us.'

PERFORMANCE, CONVERSATIONS, PUBLICATIONS AND MORE IN PHASES 2 AND 3

The current, first phase of the presentation will be followed by two more which will go into greater depth. For example, spring 2024 sees an accompanying programme including a performance by artist Alexis Blake on mourning, laments and loss, a panel discussion on the question 'does art need context?', and a conversation with the artist Miriam Cahn. A third phase will follow publication – scheduled for summer 2024 – of the report by historian Raphael Gross, who is currently reviewing the provenance research carried out by the Foundation E. G. Bührle Collection. The exhibition, then, is not just a snapshot but also a step in an ongoing, dialogue-oriented process.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Kunsthaus Zürich, Heimplatz, CH-8001 Zurich. tel. +41 (0)44 253 84 84

Admission to the collection, including the new presentation of the Bührle Collection, is free on Wednesdays. For details of opening hours and prices, see www.kunsthhaus.ch (subject to change as from 1 January 2024).

BACKGROUND INFORMATION AND CONTACT FOR EDITORS

You can find illustrations as well as this media release at www.kunsthhaus.ch/en/medien-bereich, including a [link to download the following information](#):

- People involved / colophon
- Wall texts from the exhibition
- Biographies of previous owners
- Glossary
- Statement by the advisory panel
- Layout of the exhibition

For further information, contact:

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