

Media release  
Zurich, 23 February 2023

**Kunsthaus Zürich presents 'Fuseli. Fashion – Fetishism – Fantasy'**

**From 24 February to 21 May 2023, the Kunsthaus Zürich presents the intimate drawings of the Swiss artist Henry Fuseli (1741–1825). Fuseli was one of the most idiosyncratic, original and controversial artists in 18th-century Europe. The emphatically individualistic and sensationalist character of his art divided public opinion throughout his career.**

Today, we can appreciate a facet of Fuseli that most during his lifetime were unaware of: his private interest in drawing the figure of the modern woman, who exhibits powerfully erotic traits.

PROVOCATIVE AND ECCENTRIC

The Kunsthaus Zürich has gathered together some 60 works offering a unique opportunity to experience Fuseli the draughtsman at his most innovative and exciting, as the creator of a fascinating pictorial universe that is as provocative as it is challenging.

FUSELI'S IMAGE OF THE MODERN WOMAN: CHALLENGING AND SELF-CONFIDENT

Where we might expect to see eighteenth-century idealized bodies in the appealing poses and proportions of classical statues, instead we encounter women whose anatomies are defined by stiff bodices, waistbands, puffed sleeves and pointed shoes, and whose heads are crowned by coiffures of the most bizarre and complicated kind. Fuseli offers us not the submissive and eroticized nudes of painters such as Boucher, Fragonard or Ingres, but rather female figures who are strikingly challenging, self-confidently returning the viewer's gaze or even ignoring them completely. In general, Fuseli presents his women as seemingly unapproachable, solo figures. When gathered together in groups, their activities may seem mysterious; in erotic scenes, meanwhile, the women appear to remain firmly in control.

#### PSYCHOLOGICALLY EXPRESSIVE WORKS

When attempting to explain this aspect of Fuseli's work – in particular his obsession with highly eccentric-looking women's hairdos – scholars have sometimes resorted to the vocabulary of psychoanalysis to decode some of his unconscious motivations. Nevertheless, his depictions of the modern woman as a figure of heightened power cannot be analysed in isolation from the emphatically masculine heroes that dominate Fuseli's public art. Both are symptomatic of male fears surrounding the destabilization of traditional gender roles, a phenomenon that preoccupied countless European artists and writers during the 18th century.

#### EXTRAVAGANT HAIRSTYLES

Fuseli's interest in the depiction of women is especially evident in the drawings he made during the years following his wedding to Sophia Rawlins, who was in her mid-20s at the time. He first met his future wife when he engaged her as a model, and she continued to pose for him long after they were married. Rawlins' features can be discerned in many of Fuseli's drawings, although there is little doubt that few of the sheets were actually intended as portraits. Rather than focusing on her face, the artist devoted much greater attention to her constantly changing hairstyle, meticulously reproducing the extraordinarily complicated hairdos with their densely layered curls, bows and bands which went far beyond the standards of late 18th-century hairdressers.

#### WORKS OF SUPREME TECHNICAL COMPLEXITY

Unquestionably, Fuseli's interest in the female figure opened up new avenues for his draughtsmanship; indeed, the technical complexity of these drawings is exceeded by none of his other works in the medium. The exhibition and the accompanying catalogue examine the wide variety of women's hairstyles, the role and presence of Sophia Rawlins in Fuseli's work and the novel image of the self-confident female figure, as well as the influence of the libertarian environment on the artist's creative imagination.

#### THE MYSTERY OF THE DRAWINGS' INTENDED AUDIENCE

One of the biggest mysteries surrounding these drawings concerns the identity of their original audience, and whether Fuseli actually showed them to anyone at all. The indications are that only a small number of fellow artists and a select circle of classically educated men ever viewed them during his lifetime. It is entirely understandable that Fuseli never intended these drawings for a wide audience, since his profoundly ambivalent depictions of empowered femininity are far from unproblematic. For today's audiences, however, they are of immense relevance

at a time when society is increasingly concerning itself with the complex relationship between art, gender and power.

### RARELY SEEN LOANS FROM THE US, CANADA AND NEW ZEALAND

'Fuseli. Fashion – Fetishism – Fantasy', curated in Zurich by Dr Jonas Beyer, is the outcome of a close collaboration with The Courtauld, London. This has enabled the Kunsthaus to bring together loans from a wide variety of countries including the US, Canada and New Zealand. There is unlikely to be another chance to view in such a concentrated form this fascinating aspect of the Swiss artist who found fame in the UK. The exhibition is thus a unique opportunity to explore not only the 'official' Fuseli, but also the very private draughtsmanship of the 'Wild Swiss'.

### PUBLICATION AND GUIDED TOURS

Fuseli and the Modern Woman: Fashion, Fantasy, Fetishism. A catalogue edited by David H. Solkin and Ketty Gottardo, with contributions by Jonas Beyer, Mechthild Fend, Ketty Gottardo and David H. Solkin. Published by Paul Holberton Publishing, London. The German edition is published by Scheidegger & Spiess. Paperback, 168 pages, 145 colour illustrations. Available for CHF 39 at the museum shop and in bookstores.

Public guided tours in German take place on Saturdays 25 February, 11/25 March at 11 a.m. and Thursdays 6/20 April, 4 May, 11 May at 6.30 p.m.

Supported by the Elisabeth Weber Foundation, Boston Consulting Group and Albers & Co AG. The German catalogue was supported by the Wolfgang Ratjen Foundation, Vaduz.

### GENERAL INFORMATION

Kunsthaus Zürich, Heimplatz, CH-8001 Zurich

Tel. +41 (0)44 253 84 84, [www.kunsthhaus.ch](http://www.kunsthhaus.ch)

Fri-Sun/Tue 10 a.m.–6 p.m., Wed, Thu 10 a.m.–8 p.m. For public holiday opening see [www.kunsthhaus.ch](http://www.kunsthhaus.ch).

Admission incl. collection: CHF 23 / CHF 18 (concessions and groups). Children and young people under the age of 17 free of charge.

Free admission with a 2023 annual membership.

Advance ticket sales (optional): [www.kunsthhaus.ch/tickets](http://www.kunsthhaus.ch/tickets)

Zurich Tourism, tourist information office in Zurich main railway station, tel. +41 44 215 40 00, [info@zuerich.com](mailto:info@zuerich.com), [www.zuerich.com](http://www.zuerich.com).

CONTACT FOR THE MEDIA

Media releases and images to download as well as an overview of dates for media briefings can be found at [www.kunsthhaus.ch/en/medien-bereich/media-corner/](http://www.kunsthhaus.ch/en/medien-bereich/media-corner/).

For further information, contact: Kunsthhaus Zürich, Kristin Steiner, [kristin.steiner@kunsthhaus.ch](mailto:kristin.steiner@kunsthhaus.ch), tel. +41 (0)44 253 84 13