

**Press release**  
**Zurich, 23 March 2023**

## **Kunsthhaus Zürich devotes a major exhibition to cultural transfer from Islamic to European art**

**From 24 March to 16 July 2023, the Kunsthhaus Zürich presents 'Re-Orientations. Europe and Islamic art, from 1851 to today'. Featuring a wide variety of exhibits, the presentation reveals the importance of Islamicate cultures to Western fine and applied art, from Wassily Kandinsky to Gülsün Karamustafa.**

'Re-Orientations' is an exclusive production created by the Kunsthhaus itself. The approximately 170 drawings, watercolours, paintings and photographs, metal, ceramic and glass objects as well as textiles, videos, installations and an animated film are drawn mainly from European collections, and have been brought together to set up a unique dialogue. Curator Dr Sandra Gianfreda and a team of experts have spent two years preparing the presentation. It places works by the following artists in the context of developments in society: Clara Laila Abid Alsstar, Hélène Adant, Anila Quayyum Agha, Nevin Aladağ, Baltensperger + Siepert, Muhammet Ali Baş, Marwan Bassiouni, Edmond Bénard, Henriette Browne, Carlo Bugatti, William De Morgan, Théodore Deck, Mariano Fortuny y Madrazo, Jean-Léon Gérôme, Karl Gerstner, Ja'far ibn Najaf 'Ali, Elisabeth Jerichau-Baumann, Wassily Kandinsky, Gülsün Karamustafa, Bouchra Khalili, Paul Klee, J. & L. Lobmeyr, Henri Matisse, Gabriele Münter, Muhammad'Ali Ashraf, Muhammad Ja'far, Muhammad Yusuf, Osman Hamdi Bey, Lotte Reiniger, Charles Claude Rudhardt, and Salah al-Din. Also represented are numerous unknown historical artists from Algeria, Egypt, India, Iran, Iraq, Morocco, Spain, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey and Uzbekistan.

Historical explanations and definitions help to elucidate the selection and interrelationships of these and other artistic positions.

### WHAT IS ISLAMIC ART?

Over the centuries, the Islamic world has encompassed very different territories, from South-East to Western Asia and from North Africa to the Iberian Peninsula. In the past it was collectively referred to as the 'Orient' – a term that has become

highly controversial in the context of postcolonial discourse. The designation 'Islamic art' comprises Islam as culture, and takes into account differences not only of geography but also of style and era. In that respect, the term 'Islamic' is not so different from the concept of 'Western' art, a similarly catch-all term which has its own shortcomings.

### ISLAMOPHILIA PROMPTS APPRECIATION AND ENGAGEMENT

'Re-Orientations' explores not only the widely known phenomenon of Orientalism but also another, less familiar form of reception of the Islamic world, namely 'Islamophilia'. It began as an appreciation of Islamic art on the part of scholars and collectors, and led to artistic engagement in both the applied and fine arts. Curator Dr Sandra Gianfreda views Islamophilia as a manifestation of a transcultural process. Cultures are not hermetic entities but are in fact intermeshed: they are hybrid constructions with permeable boundaries that are undergoing constant change. 'In today's public debates about "cultural appropriation" and "othering", the concept of transculturality can help to foster a more nuanced view of cultural "borrowings" and comprehend them as part of a cultural transfer', she says. A modern approach to presenting them must also include a critical examination of earlier art historiography.

### INITIAL IMPULSE AND TURNING POINT IN RECEPTION

The impulse that sparked the reception of Islamic art in the 19th century is generally agreed to be the first Great Exhibition in London in 1851, at which the exhibits from the Mughal Empire in India especially, among other Islamic objects, were greeted with a genuine excitement that was to have far-reaching consequences. After further exhibitions in London, Vienna, Paris and Algiers, the Munich show 'Masterpieces of Muhammadan Art' in 1910 raised the bar still further. Museums, art dealers and private collectors from a number of countries supplied some 3,600 exhibits, including valuable rugs, ceramics, works in metal and Persian miniatures. The Islamic objects were labelled as 'masterpieces' for the first time, placing them on a par with European paintings by the Renaissance masters. An attempt was also made to categorize them scientifically, lending a huge boost to the discipline of Islamic art history that had recently emerged in the West. Ultimately, the aesthetic reception in Europe led to the construction of a canon of Islamic art.

### MATISSE, KANDINSKY, MÜNTER AND OTHERS ON A QUEST FOR INSPIRATION

Henri Matisse, Albert Marquet and Hans Purrmann all travelled specially from Paris to view the ground-breaking Munich exhibition, which was also attended by Wassily Kandinsky, Gabriele Münter, Franz Marc, Le Corbusier, Max Laeuger and

others. In their quest for new forms of expression, they investigated the stylistic devices and techniques of Islamic art, which they then adapted to their needs and internalized. Combining them with their own culture and the experiences of their time they produced new, standalone creations that emancipated themselves from their models. The traces of this are in some cases obvious, for example in the works of many applied artists such as the French master ceramicist Théodore Deck and the Austrian glassmakers J. & L. Lobmeyr. Elsewhere, as with Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee, they are only discernible at second glance.

### THE TWO SIDES OF COLONIALISM

The curiosity about, and admiration for, Islamic objects were often concerned merely with formal aesthetics: artists did not necessarily develop a deeper interest in their original function, context, creators, or indeed the peoples of the countries concerned in general. From the present-day perspective, their preoccupation may therefore be seen as somewhat superficial; but there is also an element of appropriation about it that subliminally reflects the hegemonic attitudes of the time. Artists including Henri Matisse, Wassily Kandinsky, Gabriele Münter and Paul Klee travelled to what were then the colony of Algeria and the protectorates of Morocco and Tunisia, benefiting from the colonial structures that facilitated their visits. Being part of this system and making use of it must, however, have left an unsavoury aftertaste in the mouth of many an artist. Matisse, for instance, was no defender of the colonial system. That did not, however, prevent him from buying objects and textiles from the French North African protectorates through which he travelled, and using them for purposes other than those for which they were originally intended, as 'object-actors' in his works. Nor did he have any qualms about marketing the Orientalist motif of the odalisque in the 1920s. At the same time, the high esteem in which he held Islamic culture is evident in a late quotation from 1947: 'Enlightenment thus came to me from the Orient'. For him, however, it was not just a revelation but also a vindication of his previous efforts to create a new concept of the image.

### ART AGAINST THE BACKDROP OF CHANGING CONTEXTS

An example such as that of Matisse shows that modern-day values cannot casually be imposed on the past. Today, however, we can critically interrogate these images that, for more than a century, have been regarded as masterpieces and develop a considered approach to them – in part thanks to the gaze of contemporary artists including Gülsün Karamustafa – recipient of the Roswitha Haftmann Prize, Europe's best-endowed award for contemporary artists – and Bouchra Khalili, whose videos address postcolonial issues. New works by Marwan

Bassiouni in his 'New Swiss Views' series presenting Islam amongst us will also be on display in the exhibition.

The reception of Islamic art is a complex and multi-layered topic. The curator therefore decided early on to focus on a small number of case studies that typify their respective eras. These reflect the diversity of artistic approaches, the artists' origins, and the country of reception. In the oeuvre of some artists, it is possible to identify forms of reception that extend beyond formal aesthetics and lend additional dimensions to this transcultural phenomenon.

Visitors can expect a kaleidoscopic display in the large exhibition hall of the Kunsthaus, arranged in accordance with thematic criteria.

'Re-Orientations' is an artistic plea for a continuation of the transcultural exchange between East and West, South and North, extending beyond ethnic, religious and national boundaries. It is also a critical examination of how we deal with our cultural heritage. Dr Sandra Gianfreda developed the concept with the assistance of a scientific panel comprising the following members: Prof. Rémi Labrusse, Professor of Contemporary Art History at the University of Paris-Nanterre; Dr Axel Langer, Curator Near and Middle East and Swiss masks, Museum Rietberg, Zurich; Hannan Salamat, M.A. in cultural studies and theology with a focus on Islam, lecturer at the ZIID – Zürcher Institut für interreligiösen Dialog, Zurich (Zurich Institute for Interfaith Dialogue).

### PUBLICATION, AUDIOGUIDE AND PODCAST

The exhibition catalogue 'Re-Orientations. Europe and Islamic art, from 1851 to today' (312 pages, 300 colour illustrations) is published by Hirmer. It is available in German and English editions from the Kunsthaus shop and bookstores, price CHF 59.

Audioguide with an artists' linguistic intervention by Clara Laila Abid Alsstar and Muhammet Ali Baş. Available in English, German, French and Italian. Included in the online ticket to the exhibition, or CHF 3 at the cash desk

Podcast: Two episodes of the 'IslamicMediaClub' podcast accompany the exhibition. Editor and producer: Tuğba Kara.

### GUIDED TOURS

Public guided tours in German take place at 6 p.m. on Wednesdays and 11 a.m. on Sundays (except 3 May). A guided tour in French takes place at 11 a.m. on Saturday 1 April, with another in English at 11 a.m. on Saturday 3 June. The Kunsthaus will be happy to arrange private guided tours in these and other languages on request.

ACCOMPANYING PROGRAMME

Nacer Khemir. Regards sur Paul Klee

Artist talk with the Tunisian-French film-maker and artist Nacer Khemir, conducted by Nadia Radwan in French.

In association with the Alliance Française in Zurich and the French Embassy in Switzerland

Fri 24 March, 6.30 p.m.

CHF 15 / CHF 10 (concessions); CHF 5 with a valid exhibition ticket and for members

Re-Orientations. From idea to exhibition

Talk between curator Sandra Gianfreda and Christoph Stuehn

Wed 26 April, 6.30 p.m., in German

CHF 10 / CHF 8 (concessions); CHF 4 with a valid exhibition ticket and for members

Out of the Box. Exhibitions in dialogue

Dialogue guided tour in German with Sandra Gianfreda (curator of Re-Orientations) and Monika Jagfeld (curator of Outsider Art under the Crescent Moon)

Wed 3 May, 6 p.m.

Admission ticket plus CHF 6 / CHF 4 (concessions). Places limited, register via the Kunsthaus Zürich online events calendar

Wed 7 June, 6 p.m. at the open art museum, St. Gallen

Admission ticket / members free, register at [info@openartmuseum.ch](mailto:info@openartmuseum.ch)

Cultural Appropriation / Appreciation?

Talk with Jens Balzer (writer and author, DIE ZEIT, Berlin); Schoole Mostafawy (Curator of Global Art History, Badisches Landesmuseum, Karlsruhe) and Nika Timashkova (artist, Basel) and a further guest; opening address: Jens Balzer, moderator: Laura Hindelang (University of Bern)

In association with MANAZIR

Wed 31 May, 6.30 p.m., in German

CHF 15 / CHF 10 (concessions); CHF 5 with a valid exhibition ticket and for members

A Thousand and One Days

Artist talk with the Iranian artist and activist Parastou Forouhar, conducted by Susann Wintsch (curator)

In association with UZH Alumni Art History

Fri 9 June, 6.30 p.m., in German

CHF 15 / CHF 10 (concessions); CHF 5 with a valid exhibition ticket and for members

ACCOMPANYING FILM PROGRAMME IN ASSOCIATION WITH ARTHOUSE

To accompany 'Re-Orientations', Zurich's Arthouse cinemas will be screening a fringe programme of films from right across the 'Oriental' world. Sunday matinées:

26 March: 'Le grand voyage' (Morocco, 2004) by Ismaël Ferroukhi

16 April: 'Lawrence of Arabia' (UK, 1962) by David Lean

7 May: 'Women without Men' (Iran/USA, 2009) by Shirin Neshat

21 May: 'Bal' (Turkey, 2010) by Semih Kaplanoğlu

4 June: 'A Dragon Arrives!' (Iran, 2016) by Mani Haghighi

Further information and tickets: [www.arthouse.ch/re-orientations](http://www.arthouse.ch/re-orientations)

### GENERAL INFORMATION

Kunsthhaus 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: 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](http://www.kunsthhaus.ch/en/medien-bereich).

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