

Press release

Zurich, 28 September 2017

Kunsthhaus Zürich presents an exhibition on 'Reformation'

From 29 September 2017 to 14 January 2018 the Kunsthhaus Zürich is staging an exhibition on aspects of the Reformation in the visual arts. Reflecting the central theme of transformation and renewal, it brings together a cross-section of works from the 16th to the 20th centuries: late medieval religious imagery, Counter-Reformation Baroque paintings, history pictures from the 19th century and the subliminally religious art of Mondrian and the Concretists. At its centre is Ferdinand Hodler's 'Unanimity', his monumental history painting of an event from the religious schism.

The historical Reformation sparked by Luther 500 years ago had far-reaching consequences for art. From now on, the faithful were supposed to carry the image of Christ in their hearts rather than gaze upon it. This view, influenced by the teachings of Zwingli and Calvin, can be seen to this day in Reformed regions of Switzerland. Churches are empty, and religious works have lost their function as mediators of salvation. In the wake of the Reformation, pictures have undergone a significant transformation. They now demonstrate artistic skill and stimulate the senses, thoughts, and memories: in short, they have become art. This also explains the presence of an extensive collection of religious works at the Kunsthhaus in the Reformed city of Zurich. They and their more recent successors are testimony to the essence of art: a means by which people can aspire to transformation, improvement and renewal – an ongoing 're-formation', in fact. The Kunsthhaus's 'Reformation' presentation – the latest in the 'Picture Ballot!' series – is divided into five sections: 'Reformation', 'Unanimity', 'Memory', 'Enlightenment' and 'Renewal'. Guest curator Andreas Rüfenacht has assembled 75 paintings, sculptures and rarely seen drawings from the holdings of the Kunsthhaus.

REFORMATION. RELIGIOUS WORKS BECOME ART

The closing years of the medieval era saw the creation of many religious images. Large numbers of altars, liturgical utensils and lavishly decorated sculptures were endowed by those keen to avoid Purgatory. 'Good works' of this kind were intended to improve the soul. The Reformation's critique of the Church, which began with Luther's 95 theses against indulgences in 1517, extended to key areas of medieval theology and liturgy. The abolition of mass, the rejection of worship of the departed and restrictions on the veneration of saints proved fatal to the images. Their swift removal from churches marked a highly visible break with the established faith. The exhibition first examines the function of religious

images and the crisis of the old Church. The content, institutions and rituals that were the Reformation's targets are manifest in the altarpieces and sculptures that have survived. The iconoclasm in Zurich, which saw the organised emptying of the city's churches, is of broader interest. The sections of the exhibition that follow consider the lasting reverberations of the schism through a selection of works from various eras.

UNANIMITY: REFORMATION AS DEMOCRATIC IDEA

In 1911 Ferdinand Hodler was commissioned to produce a large-format history painting for the new town hall in Hanover. Its subject was an event from 1533, when the assembled citizenry pledged support for the Reformation and the Catholic councillors fled the city. In Hanover's new town hall, the scene was endowed with a democratic character. Its message – that change comes about through co-determination – was one that Hodler also incorporated into a somewhat smaller version of the painting for Zurich: 'Unanimity. Second Version' (1912–1913). The Kunsthauus holds around 100 sketches and studies for the two images. Around 20 of these rarely seen works on paper are exhibited in the room behind the monumental painting that has hung permanently in the staircase gallery of the Kunsthauus since 1919.

MEMORY: NATIONAL UNITY AGAINST DENOMINATIONAL BOUNDARIES

By the 19th century, historicizing interest in the Reformation was already being used to cement a liberal identification with a national homeland. Ludwig Vogel – Zurich's most famous history painter of the time – is a prime example. In 1819 he conceived 'Zwingli's Farewell on Departure for the Battle of Kappel', an event from autumn 1531. The story is based on an account handed down by the Zurich Reformer Heinrich Bullinger, which tells of Zwingli's horse taking fright. Vogel possibly interprets this as an ill omen for national cohesion across the denominational divide. In his 1869 work entitled 'The Milk Soup at Kappel', by contrast, Albert Anker offered a positive and idealized image of the historically attested fraternization between the opposing Reformed and Catholic sides in the First War of Kappel in 1529, which ended without bloodshed. Memories of the good old days also expressed themselves in other ways: the period around 1800 saw a turn towards the sensuous and, by extension, the religious. In certain artistic circles, the quest for a new form of art harked back to the pre-Reformation Old Masters. Working in Rome, the 'Nazarenes' (a term of mockery derived from their alleged habit of dressing as Jesus of Nazareth's early Christian followers) gave rise to a form of representation that, while highly accomplished technically, was somewhat pietistic and sought to give expression to the heart, soul and feelings. Greatly valued at courts in southern Germany, such art soon became popular in middle-class, Biedermeier households. Its influence lives on to this day in kitsch motifs. Above all, however, the Nazarenes were critical of what they saw as the overly restrictive art of Neoclassicism.

Their chief spokesman was Johann Joachim Winckelmann, whose celebrated 1764 portrait by Angelica Kauffmann is held by the Kunsthaus. It shows him as the 'Evangelist' of the Enlightenment. The pure, simple beauty of Classical art postulated by Winckelmann has an undertone of anti-clericalism and is, consequently, a kind of 'reformed' art.

ENLIGHTENMENT: COUNTER-REFORMATION TURNS TO THE BAROQUE

From a historical perspective, post-Reformation Catholic art strikes an explicitly sensuous counterpoint to the spirituality of the Protestants, with their preference for words and animosity to images. The decree on images drawn up at the Council of Trent in 1563 remained true to established ecclesiastical tradition: religious images were to serve the purposes of veneration, edification and remembrance of the saints' miracles. The image made the spiritual joys of heaven overwhelmingly palpable as divine enlightenment – as can be seen in the paintings, which propagate the powerful, salvational and true Christian Church. 'The Veil of Veronica', the true face of Christ by Philippe de Champaigne, painted before 1654, is the central work in this display. As in most museum collections, in the Kunsthaus's collection galleries the art of the Counter-Reformation is shown in the context of Baroque painting, and is therefore addressed on the basis of aesthetic and art-historical rather than ideological criteria.

RENEWAL: PURE ART ON THE ALTAR

The Reformation was a movement of renewal: one in which both images and their former religious functions were lost. At the same time, it opened the door to new developments that continue to this day. The Concretists' turn towards pure painting and an art entirely divorced from external circumstances (religion, nature, politics) is in some ways a distant echo of the Reformation's critique of images. Piet Mondrian, the De Stijl group of artists and, following them, the Zurich Concretists focused on universal laws of geometry, mathematics and optics. Their art has a subliminally religious character, which expresses itself in perfectly formed compositions, the use of primary colours, and pure basic forms such as the circle and square. They also used religiously connoted language in their manifestos and, occasionally, the titles of their pictures. Echoing Romantic conceptions of art reflected especially in the idea of the museum as temple of art, the last gallery of the exhibition presents pure art on the altar. The character of the intimate octagonal room, a seemingly central structure at the end of the series of galleries in the Moser building, positively cries out for a presentation of this kind. The thesis repeatedly advanced since Werner Hofmann's 'Luther and the Consequences for Art' exhibition at the Hamburger Kunsthalle in 1983 is expressively demonstrated once again: that while it may have initially constrained art, the Reformation ultimately gave it complete freedom.

Supported by Albers & Co AG

GENERAL INFORMATION

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Fri–Sun/Tues 10 a.m.–6 p.m., Wed, Thurs 10 a.m.–8 p.m. For public holiday opening see www.kunsthhaus.ch.

Admission: CHF 16 / CHF 11 (concessions and groups). Combined tickets for all temporary exhibitions and the collection: CHF 23 / CHF 18 (concessions and groups). Admission free to visitors up to the age of 16.

Public guided tours of the exhibition with guest curator Andreas Rüfenacht take place at 6 p.m. on Thursday 19 October and 2 p.m. on Sunday 5 November.

Publication: The exhibition guide in German language (20 pages, 12 illustrations) with texts by guest curator Andreas Rüfenacht is available at the Kunsthhaus shop for CHF 5.

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/kunsthhaus-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.

NOTE TO EDITORS

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

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