

Media release  
Zurich, 5 March 2026

## **A master of provocation: Kunsthaus Zürich presents 'Félicien Rops. Laboratory of Lust'**

**The theme of sexuality and the erotic is omnipresent in the history of art. It is therefore less a question of whether the topic belongs in a museum than of how it is addressed. Today, the search for answers to this question appears more important than ever. The Kunsthaus Zürich has chosen to explore the topic through an especially prominent example: the art of Félicien Rops (1833–1898). From 6 March to 31 May 2026, it presents one of the most radical, yet most enigmatic artists of the fin de siècle. Rops's demonically erotic visual universe defied the conventions of his time, and asks questions about social roles, moral conceptions and artistic freedom that are still relevant today.**

The most toxic bloom of Symbolism, bane of the bourgeoisie, enfant terrible – the list of epithets used to describe Félicien Rops and his demonically erotic art is a long one. Rops was a transgressor of boundaries. Lavished with praise by writers such as Charles Baudelaire and Joris-Karl Huysmans, the Belgian artist doggedly probed the boundaries of art. In his works, he railed against bourgeois double standards and small-minded propriety.

Drawing on the gender clichés and stereotypes of his time, Rops exposed the hypocrisy of the upright citizen. The Rops phenomenon thus reveals not only some of the finest accomplishments in printmaking and draughtsmanship in around 1900, but also sheds light on gender relations at the turn of the 20th century.

### CREATIVE NICHES

'Cruelty is nothing but human energy that has not yet been corrupted by civilization', wrote the Marquis de Sade in his 'Philosophy in the Boudoir'. Despite the questionable implications of that statement, it is easy to understand why Rops's art has so often exerted a powerful impact on intellectuals: his depiction of untrammelled eroticism, often bordering on cruelty, opened up niches in which creative spaces could develop – places seemingly still untarnished by civilization's influence.

Rops himself encouraged the idea that his graphic works were resistant to facile praise, observing that 'an artist should care little whether something is

understood, save perhaps by a very few! And what a pleasure it is to practise this "Druidism". To be one's own hermetic high priest [...]!

### THE TWO SIDES OF AN ŒUVRE

Rops's work thrives on contradictions: it was at once widely disseminated and consciously private. While he gained his reputation as one of the most accomplished and productive book illustrators of his time, in parallel with this he developed an oeuvre that was deliberately hidden from the public gaze.

For many years, Paris, the capital of art at the time, was the ideal place for Rops to frequent literary circles and create frontispieces for new works of fiction. Thanks to the intervention of Auguste Poulet-Malassis, he was able to collaborate with Charles Baudelaire, while the works of Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly, Stéphane Mallarmé and Paul Verlaine all featured his illustrations.

Yet alongside this, there was a second, less-known side of the artist, who worked dedicatedly for private collectors, in open defiance of public conventions. Employing a repertoire of motifs that sought to burst through every boundary of the erotic, he questioned social norms and explored the potential of art. To this day, his most provocative works in public collections are kept locked away from prying eyes.

### A DOCUMENT OF HIS TIME

Typical of the era is Rops's stylization of women as 'femmes fatales', depicting them in a way that blends attraction with horror. The exhibition picks up on this and asks whether, in his opposition to bourgeois morality, Rops perpetuated the very stereotypes he set out to criticize.

Regardless of this, Rops is today seen as one of Belgium's most important artists and, along with Fernand Khnopff, a central figure in the Belgian fin de siècle. One of his principal works, 'The Temptation of St. Anthony', gained particular fame thanks to a detailed interpretation by Sigmund Freud. It was also hailed at the first salon of Les XX – a sign that Rops's art-historical importance was obvious to an up-and-coming generation of artists, such as James Ensor.

The exhibition opens up a dual perspective: it presents outstanding drawings from the Symbolist period while at the same time reflecting social ideas around 1900 that need to be reexamined today.

Conceived in close collaboration with the Royal Library of Belgium (KBR), the exhibition presents more than sixty works, over half of which from the KBR itself, as well as key pieces by the artist from collections in Switzerland and abroad, notably the Musée Félicien Rops, the Musée Marmottan Monet and the Musée d'Orsay. The exhibition was conceived and curated by Jonas Beyer (Kunsthau Zürich) and Daan van Heesch (KBR).

## KUNSTHAUS ZÜRICH

The exhibition is under the patronage of Patrick Van Gheel, Ambassador of the Kingdom of Belgium to Switzerland.

Supported by the KYTHERA Kultur-Stiftung.

### ART EDUCATION

The exhibition is accompanied by a lavishly illustrated catalogue (English/German) published by Hirmer Verlag, containing essays by, among others, Juliane Au, Elisabeth Bronfen and Véronique Carpiaux. It is available from the Kunsthaus shop for CHF 44.

Public guided tours in German: Thu 19 March, 6.30 p.m.; Sun 12 April, 11 a.m.; Sat 9 May, 6.30 p.m.

### GENERAL INFORMATION

Kunsthaus Zürich, Heimplatz 1/5, CH-8001 Zurich, tel. +41 (0)44 253 84 84, [www.kunsthaus.ch](http://www.kunsthaus.ch). For admission prices, opening hours and events see [www.kunsthaus.ch/en/besuch-planen/](http://www.kunsthaus.ch/en/besuch-planen/) and [www.kunsthaus.ch/en/besuch-planen/programm/](http://www.kunsthaus.ch/en/besuch-planen/programm/).

Tickets can be obtained from the cash desk or in advance at [tickets.kunsthaus.ch](http://tickets.kunsthaus.ch). 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)

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