

Media release
Zurich, 6 June 2019

Kunsthhaus Zürich presents 'Hour Zero. Art from 1933 to 1955'

From 7 June to 22 September 2019 the Kunsthhaus Zürich turns its attention to developments in art between the watershed year of 1933 and 1955. How did artists respond to the historical rift created by Fascism and the Second World War? And how, once the conflict was over, did they find new ways to give shape to existence – and indeed the existence of art itself?

This exhibition looks for answers in the Kunsthhaus Collection, with a thematic presentation of around 70 works including many paintings and sculptures that have not been shown for decades. The art of this period is characterized by drastic change and massive contrasts. After the war – which culminated in 'Hour Zero' as the fighting finally came to an end – the post-1945 decade sees a shift, from a reckoning with the conflict's far-reaching consequences to the creation of a new artistic language accompanied by a new freedom of expression.

STRIKING CONTRASTS – IN SWITZERLAND AND ELSEWHERE

The contrasts in painting between 1933 and the end of the war are especially fascinating. In Switzerland, the traditional representational art of figures such as Hermann Huber persists alongside a more modern form of representation exemplified by Max Gubler and Varlin. But there are also artists whose work draws more heavily on international influences: they include Serge Brignoni and Otto Tschumi, both closely associated with Surrealism; and Max Bill, Fritz Glarner and Sophie Taeuber-Arp, who turn towards the non-representational. National art meets key international positions, with works by Salvador Dalí, Pablo Picasso, Fernand Léger, Oskar Kokoschka and Paul Klee evidencing central facets of modernism that blend Surrealism and figuration, while František Kupka and Georges Vantongerloo speak for abstraction. After the war, non-representational art becomes the prevailing idiom: positions from Switzerland include both the established Zurich Concretists and figures such as Wilfrid Moser and Hugo Weber. International manifestations include the European 'informel' of Wols, Nicolas de Staël, Georges Mathieu and Maria Vieira da Silva, and the North American abstraction of Jackson Pollock, Jean-Paul Riopelle and others.

Confronting them are Jean Dubuffet and Alberto Giacometti, standing for the enduring presence and resurgence of the figurative tradition in a changed environment. Sculpture is dominated by the human figure (Germaine Richier, Marino Marini, Alberto Giacometti); but here too, abstract positions can be found (Alexander Calder, Antoine Pevsner). Later, the emerging Nouveau Réalisme of Jean Tinguely and the like reveals the new 'thingly' character of the artwork.

FROM REDOUBT TO ALL-OVER

Equally vast are the differences in content. In the 1930s we find works with decidedly political and socially critical undertones (Otto Baumberger's 'Masse' from 1936), and others in which the worsening geopolitical climate is tangible. These contrast with Fernand Léger's vitalist composition 'Fleur jaune' created in the US. Idylls of Switzerland as impregnable redoubt represent a world that is psychologically and artistically apart: Hermann Huber's touching celebration of peace and security in 'Vorlesende und Knabe' from 1940–41, and Jakob Ritzmann's evocation of an allotment hut, a modest source of energy amidst the anxious everyday existence of a Switzerland surrounded by the turmoil of war. Post-1945, figurative artists such as Dubuffet and Alberto Giacometti, and abstract informalists such as de Staël, seek to come to terms with the historic rift opened up by the war. Thereafter the mood lightens, with luminous abstract structures – as in the pictures of Vieira da Silva in France and Riopelle in North America – proclaiming a new world-view energized by colour.

FEMALE ARTISTS EMERGE AS INNOVATORS

One particularly striking feature is the emergence of innovative female artists: works such as Sophie Taeuber-Arp's abstract forms in 'Douze espaces' from 1939, Germaine Richier's reinvention of the female and male bodies in time of war, Isabelle Waldberg's organically constructive experimental arrangement 'Construction en bois' from 1945, a spectacular abstract composition by Hilla von Rebay dating from 1946 and Verena Loewensberg's concrete composition from around 1950 are some of the densest sections of the exhibition. Overall, the presentation put together by collection curator Philippe Büttner reveals just how much energy was tied up by the war and then released by its conclusion. It shows how figuration and abstraction endured side by side as underlying idioms of modern art and contributed to the fundamental renewal of artistic creativity.

FOCUS ON PROVENANCE

In parallel with 'Hour Zero', the Kunsthaus is presenting the results of a provenance research project supported by the Federal Office of Culture in the Collection of Prints and Drawings. Works that entered the Collection between

1933 and 1950 have been investigated, including pieces by Lovis Corinth, Otto Dix, Käthe Kollwitz and Edvard Munch.

The results, covering 3,900 works, have been published in the 'Provenance research' section of the Kunsthaus website. Some are also available in the online collection, which has likewise been developed with support from the Federal Office of Culture, and where research can be extended to paintings and sculptures in the Kunsthaus Collection.

PUBLICATION

The exhibition catalogue (70 ill., 128 pp.), published by Scheidegger & Spiess, places the works in their historical and art-historical context. It explores the Kunsthaus's purchasing policy in the period between 1933 and 1950 and presents some interesting cases of provenance research in detail. It is available from the Kunsthaus shop and bookstores, price CHF 25.

PUBLIC GUIDED TOURS

Saturday 15 June, 1 p.m., Sunday 7 July, 11 a.m., Thursday 5 September, 3 p.m. (in German). For more information see www.kunsthhaus.ch. Specialist bodies, associations and groups can book a private guided tour: contact kunstvermittlung@kunsthhaus.ch.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Kunsthaus Zürich, Heimplatz 1, CH-8001 Zurich, www.kunsthhaus.ch
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). Combination tickets including the collection and exhibition CHF 26 / CHF 19. Admission free to visitors up to the age of 16. Information subject to change.

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 Information at Zurich Main Railway Station, tel. +41 44 215 40 00, information@zuerich.com, www.zuerich.com.

NOTE TO EDITORS

Images and media releases can be found at www.kunsthhaus.ch/en/medienbereich.

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