

Media release
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First museum retrospective in Switzerland: Vilhelm Hammershøi – The Eye That Listens

‘Vilhelm Hammershøi. The Eye That Listens’ at the Kunsthaus Zürich from 3 July to 25 October 2026 is the first comprehensive museum exhibition in Switzerland devoted to the Danish artist Vilhelm Hammershøi (1864–1916). It explores the remarkable oeuvre of a painter who employs infinitely subtle nuances of colour, and whose sparse interiors and silent cityscapes are among the most striking imagery of European modernism.

Vilhelm Hammershøi, dubbed the ‘Vermeer of the North’, is one of the most important Danish artists of his time and a national icon in his home country. His paintings mostly depict empty rooms, deserted squares or interiors suffused with muted light. For all their apparent simplicity, they are filled with a peculiarly dense atmosphere: rooms seem at once familiar and alien, objects assert their silent presence, while figures – often the artist’s wife Ida – are frequently shown only from the rear. Narrative is superseded by a concentrated observation of space, light and mood.

Indeed, that very concentration on the essential is what gives Hammershøi’s art its originality. In his pictures, everyday objects – an empty plate on the table, an unoccupied chair or a painting on the wall – take on an unexpected and often unsettling presence. The Austrian writer Heimito von Doderer once talked of the ‘furniture-like silence’ of things – a formulation that accurately describes Hammershøi’s austere interiors almost bereft of objects.

THE ART OF NUANCES

What especially distinguishes Hammershøi’s work is its sensitivity to the finest nuances. His images are invested with subtle gradations of subdued colours. Wan light falls into curiously silent rooms, shadows extend across bare walls, while the arrangement of furniture and objects often changes only slightly from one picture to the next. Those same minute variations sharpen the viewer’s gaze and focus attention on their perception.

INTELLECTUAL AFFINITY

Although Hammershøi is often described as reclusive, he remained in contact with the international art movements of his time. He was, for example, an admirer of the US painter James McNeill Whistler, whose works likewise feature harmonic colour arrangements and pared-back compositions. Whistler's practice of referring to his paintings as 'arrangements' or 'symphonies' has its counterpart in Hammershøi's work. The Danish artist, too, increasingly removes anything anecdotal from his images, focusing instead primarily on formal aspects.

In that sense, Hammershøi's art appears surprisingly modern. His concentrated compositions and minimal changes amidst constantly recurring motifs also invite comparisons with more recent artists such as the Italian painter Giorgio Morandi, who repeatedly tried out new variations of still lifes populated by small numbers of objects. The two artists share a reduced colour palette and an interest in rendering even the tiniest differences visible.

THE DIMENSION OF SILENCE

Hinted at by the exhibition's subtitle 'The Eye That Listens', another dimension of Hammershøi's work that has so far received little attention is its relationship to music. Many of his images include instruments such as a cello, piano or violin. His biography also documents connections to music: a number of his friends and collectors were musicians, and Hammershøi himself was an amateur cellist.

A particular silence emanates from his paintings: it is not the absence of sound, but rather a tense calm suggestive of the moment just before a concert begins.

FIRST MUSEUM PRESENTATION IN SWITZERLAND

The exhibition at the Kunsthaus Zürich is not limited to Hammershøi's famous interiors. Less-known subjects such as portraits, cityscapes and landscapes are also on display. The presentation also locates Hammershøi's oeuvre in a broader art-historical context.

Individual works by other artists – including Jacobus Vrel, Adolph Menzel and the contemporary painter Michaël Borremans – reveal a 'silent art history' in which related artistic approaches link up across the centuries.

The exhibition is curated by Jonas Beyer and Sandra Gianfreda. It has been created in cooperation with the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza in Madrid. The exhibition is supported by Albers & Co AG, the Fondation Etrillard, the International Music and Art Foundation and another foundation.

CATALOGUE AND ART EDUCATION

'Wilhelm Hammershøi. The Eye That Listens' is accompanied by a lavishly illustrated catalogue in German and English with contributions by Ramón Andrés, Jonas Beyer, Sandra Gianfreda and Florian Illies, Clara Marcellán and Peter Nørgaard Larsen. It will be available from the Kunsthaus shop when the exhibition opens.

Public guided tours in German: 5 and 18 July at 1 p.m., 2 / 7 / 15 / 16 August at 11 a.m. In English: Sat 15 August, 11 a.m. Dialogue guided tour in German with curators Sandra Gianfreda and Jonas Beyer on 9 July, 6.30 p.m.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Kunsthaus Zürich, Heimplatz, CH-8001 Zurich

Tel. +41 (0)44 253 84 84, www.kunsthaus.ch

For admission prices, opening hours and events see www.kunsthaus.ch/en/besuch-planen/ and www.kunsthaus.ch/en/besuch-planen/programm/.

Tickets can be obtained from the cash desk or in advance at tickets.kunsthaus.ch. Zurich Tourism, tourist information office in Zurich main railway station, tel. +41 44 215 40 00, info@zuerich.com, www.zuerich.com

INVITATION TO THE MEDIA CONFERENCE AND CONTACT FOR EDITORS

The preview takes place on 2 July from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. Welcome and introduction by Director Ann Demeester and curators Jonas Beyer and Sandra Gianfreda at 11 a.m. Please [register here](#).

Illustrations are available for download at www.kunsthaus.ch/en/medien-bereich.

Contact: Kunsthaus Zürich, Kristin Steiner, kristin.steiner@kunsthaus.ch, tel. +41 (0)44 253 84 13